

Cruising

by Charlie Cochrane



When Mrs. Freya Braithwaite broke her leg a fortnight before she was due to go on a cruise to Alta, she didn't burst into a fit of tears, nor did she get straight on the phone to her travel insurance company. Instead, she eyeballed her son from her hospital bed, saying, "Sam, I'm not fartarsing about trying to get my money back. I've rung Tracey at the travel agents and she'll arrange for the ticket to be transferred into your name. You need a break, so don't argue."

Sam had learned never to argue with his mother, especially when she was right. He *did* need a break, given what had happened the last few months. Chris-the-slimy-git had upped and left, taking with him as much as he was able to, and trying to screw over Sam for anything else he could potentially get his paws on. Which was why Sam was back living at home again, while the sale of his ex-love nest went through.

"You *can* take your laptop and work on the ship, you know. They've got internet these days, not signal flags and carrier pigeons." Mrs. B shook her head at him. "I've rung your Aunty Rita, too. She's coming to look after me while you're away."

Bugger. That was both reasonable excuses countered before Sam had the chance to use them. Still, given that he worked for himself and from home, and that he had a project which would benefit from his being able to dedicate time to it, if there was decent internet access he'd be fine. He could hide away in his cabin and watch the fjords go by, only emerging for meals and if they were showing a decent film. From what his mum had said the ship would be like a smaller, floating version of the Celtic Manor Resort. Only without the golf clubs.

The thought of Celtic Manor triggered another thought about Chris-the-slimy-git, and a memorable weekend they'd spent there when they'd still been in love and all over each other. Now they were simply all over.

Sam looked at his mum, who was wearing the no-nonsense face she'd always worn when he was a child and had been told to do something but was contemplating kicking over the traces. "Okay. I'll go."

And he went.

The ship was everything Mrs. Braithwaite had cracked it up to be. Food coming out of your ears, every sort of entertainment all hours of the day and night, and his cabin—with balcony, not that he was likely to use it given the brass-monkey weather outside—had everything he wanted. Except the promised continuous internet, as he found one morning when they'd got well away from land, hit bad weather and lost the satellite connection.

He'd read the small print when he signed up for the premium net access package because he always read the small print on everything. (Shame that Chris hadn't come with terms and conditions stating that he was at risk of turning from love's young dream into a slimy git when the gloss had worn off their relationship.) The cruise company had said they couldn't guarantee a connection when they were out of port, and not even when they were docked, given that they were heading into the Arctic Circle, but Sam had assumed that he'd be fine. Everywhere had internet access these days, didn't it? Evidently not.

So, what the hell was he going to do with himself the rest of the day or however long it would be until they got an internet connection again? He didn't even have anything much to do offline as he'd got ahead of target before he'd left and completed the one project he could do without net access. He scanned the cruise daily information sheet, without much enthusiasm about the choices on offer. Bingo. Art classes. Bridge. Pick up the ship's newspaper with the day's Sudoku. Plenty to entice the over sixties; no wonder mum loved cruises. Sam could have gone for a swim but given that the pools were all outdoor he'd be at risk of freezing his nads off. The gym didn't appeal, either—too much like hard work—and he didn't want to go into one of the bars for a coffee in case somebody took pity on him and decided to take him under their wing.

He laid the information sheet on the dressing table, closed his eyes and jabbed with his finger. When he dared look at what fate has chosen for him, he broke into a smile. Looked like he was going to spend part of the morning learning the cha-cha.

Sam arrived at the ballroom suite a few minutes early, convinced he'd be the only bloke present and probably the youngest participant by thirty years. He was wrong on both counts. While the male instructor of the pair of professional dancers who'd be leading the session didn't technically count on the tally, the other two men—one of them sixty something and the other about Sam's age—definitely did. Were they a May and December romance? They were certainly close, although the identical, extremely handsome profiles suggested father and son. One of the things Sam had appreciated about the *Lord of the Rings* films was the family style resemblance between the actors who played Denethor, Boromir and Faramir. That had centred on almost identical conks, like this pair had. The younger bloke gave Sam a shy smile, but any chance of conversation got scuppered as the class commenced.

Just shy of an hour later—Sam had noticed how all the activities were timed not to exceed the elderly attention (or bladder) span—and with dancing the cha-cha a new skill under his belt, he felt the need of caffeine. He'd resigned himself to grabbing a latte to take back to his cabin when the son said he and his dad were going to grab a coffee and would Sam like to join them?

"Yeah, thanks."

By the time they'd settled in the bar, put in their order, had a bit of a kerfuffle about who was paying for the tab and the dad insisting it was his treat, Sam felt more at ease than he'd done at any point since the ship left Southampton two days previously. It helped that they were all first-time cruisers, something they'd confessed between ballroom and bar.

"I didn't even know I was coming until a fortnight ago," Sam said. He launched into the story of his mum and her broken leg, playing up the humour of the situation in equal measure to playing down his own reluctance. Nobody wanted to sound like a saddo.

"And what do you think of it?" Clive—the dad—asked.

"It's alright, actually. Food's good, I haven't been seasick, and those four blokes singing last night were as good as anything I've paid to see recently." Sam surprised himself with his enthusiasm, as if he only now realised that he'd quite enjoyed himself.

Tom—the son—chuckled. "That's all the things I'd been worried about, too. Naff food, dicky tummy, school concert style entertainment, being surrounded by people you want to punch."

"Tom's here as a substitute, as well, although not at such short notice. Ah, thanks."

The arrival of their drinks interrupted the flow of chatter, although Sam had noticed the look of concern Tom had given his dad as he'd said the word *substitute*.

“You see,” Clive continued, once the waiter had gone, “we booked this cruise as a bucket list thing, Tom’s mum and I. Sarah had always wanted to see the Northern Lights, since she was a little girl. Here’s a lesson for you, Sam. Never leave it too late.”

“I won’t.” Unsure of what to say next, Sam looked at Tom, pleading for help.

In his turn, Tom glanced at his dad and got a little nod of the head. “Mum died six months ago. Catastrophic stroke, they reckon. She didn’t suffer. So, I’m here trying to see the aurora borealis on her behalf.”

“I’m ex-oil industry, so my intention was always gorging myself on oil and gas rigs. Did you see them last night, by the way?” Clive was evidently putting a brave face on things. “All lit up like Christmas trees.”

“I missed that,” Sam said. “Shame. I like a bit of industrial architecture.” The conversation turned to work, and the wonders of cat crackers, which eased them past the awkwardness.

When the coffees were finished, Clive eased out of his chair, warned them that they too would come to needing the loo every five minutes, and asked them to wait for him in the bar or he’d never find them again.

“He’s not told anybody else that,” Tom said, when his dad was out of earshot. “About Mum and the bucket list.”

“Oh. Right.” Sam wasn’t sure what to say next. Make some joke about keeping the single women—of which there appeared to be plenty on the cruise—at bay, or would that be tacky? Evidently not, given Tom’s next remark.

“He says it’s to stop him getting chased by husband hunters, although it’s more than that.”

“Yeah. I know how much it hurt my mum when Dad died. She soldiers on and makes light of things, because she doesn’t like fuss—that generation don’t—but I can guess what she’s feeling inside. I know how *I* feel.”

Tom nodded. “You’re on one of the big tables for dinner, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I think they put six singletons on there deliberately.” Funny how Tom had clocked him, though.

“We’re on a four. Or were, the first night. They’d moved to another table yesterday. I let slip I was gay and they didn’t like it, I guess. Faces like stewed prunes for the rest of the meal.” Tom didn’t appear upset at the fact. “So, we’ve got a spare place, if you fancy joining us. Not a problem if you don’t.”

“I’d like that. I was thinking of going up to the buffet tonight, because the conversation has a habit of turning medical and I have a feeling tonight might be a *compare our hysterectomies* session.”

“Great. I’ll get dad onto sorting it. He can charm the birds from the trees.”

As can his son.

By the time they crossed the Arctic circle, Sam had learned several dances—including the rumba at which he’d proved pretty nifty—seen an orca, slithered through the snowy streets of Andalsnes and watched the sun come up and go down over the fjords. He’d also used what little internet he could hook into to contact his important clients to say he’d got technical issues that would put him out of action for a week, and then put an out of office message on his e-mail account.

He’d also fallen in love.

Not that he’d confessed the fact to Tom yet, because Sam had fallen in love with Chris-the-slimy-git almost at first sight and look how that had turned out. He also had to consider the obvious risks

associated with holiday romances, that everything that seemed rosy on board would pale when viewed at home, as well as bearing in mind his own worry that he'd be latching onto Tom on the rebound from *his-slimy-gittiness*. And it would have felt desperately unfair to Clive to monopolise his companion given the situation.

Sam could keep in touch with Tom once they were back on dry land—he only lived a couple of hours drive away and assuming that Tom actually wanted to keep in touch—and they could take it from there, with all the special circumstances out of the way. If it was meant to be, it would work on terra firma as well as the ocean waves. In the meantime they could carry on as present, meeting over dinner and sometimes at lunch, going to dance classes and shows, usually with Clive in tow but occasionally just the two of them. It had been a bonus to discover they'd all booked the same excursion, a concert at the Arctic cathedral in Tromso, so Sam and Tom had sat thigh to thigh in the pews, listening to a stunning tenor and watching the candlelight dance on the walls.

Yep, this cruise was turning out much better than Sam had expected.

Alta. Minus twelve plus wind chill during the day, falling to minus twenty at night. Ship struggling to cope with the extreme conditions, although Sam was fine. He'd borrowed a ton of cold weather gear from his mate Rob, who had everything a winter sports addict could need, including a ton of good advice and a tub of zinc and castor oil cream for smearing on your face. No wind or cold burns for Sam, albeit his excursions hadn't counted as winter sports. At minus stupid degrees, everything was technically an extreme activity.

The three of them had been on the Northern Lights trip, but it had proved disappointing, not least because they'd not been assigned the same coach when they set off and when they'd got there, the aurora hadn't really obliged. Being a natural phenomenon, it had decided not to put on much of a show, just showing as an occasional paper thin, long white cloud that had strung itself across the sky. Might have been an ordinary cloud for all Sam knew, despite what the guide told them. Still, he'd found Tom and Clive, and they'd enjoyed warm drinks and the sense of achievement of being out in such cold and surviving unscathed.

Next day Tom texted to say his dad wanted a bit of a quiet day and did Sam fancy going into town and to the church service, where they'd be warmer than in some parts of the ship? Sam agreed, relishing the chance of them being together without their chaperone, although the thought of attending a service gave him pause for thought. Chris-the-slimy-git had suddenly turned keen on going to church, although that had probably been because he'd also turned keen on the luscious bloke who ran the choir. That particular episode of "love thy neighbour" had been the last straw, and Sam hadn't felt like going back any time soon, even though he was now living in a different parish.

He'd no sooner set his bum on the pew than he realised it had been the right decision to come. They called this place the Northern Lights church and if the designs on the walls were anything to go by he, Tom and Clive had missed a real treat with the poor show last evening. The service was all in Norwegian although there were enough clues to follow it, although when it came to communion, Sam stayed in his seat.

"You go up," he told Tom. "I'm not ready to."

Tom gave him a smile and a shrug, then joined the others filing up to the altar.

"Glad I did that," He whispered on his return. "Mum would have approved."

Sam nodded. *His* mum would approve, too.

Later, as they trudged back through the shin deep snow to get the shuttle bus, Sam asked, “Is your dad all right? Anything I can do to help?” The words sounded both a bit daft and a bit trite—what on earth *could* he do?—but he needed to say something.

“He’s just a bit overwhelmed, that’s all. Keeps thinking of mum, of course. Funnily enough, I suspect he’s thinking that she’d have been right disappointed with last night’s showing. It’s like the aurora’s let *her* down rather than us.” Tom cast Sam a sideways glance. “I’m not making much sense.”

“Actually, you are. I can’t decide if it’s worse that we saw them and they were a bit dull than if we’d seen them and they’d been great. Or not seen them at all. Now *I’m* making no sense.” Sam slipped his arm over Tom’s shoulders and gave him a squeeze. “I think I get your drift, though. It was never going to be easy for either of you, was it?”

“No. But I’m glad I came, though, and not just for mum’s sake. She’d have liked you, you know. You’d have made her laugh.”

Would he? Sam didn’t feel like he’d been a bundle of laughs over the last few days, but maybe his self-confidence had been so shot by the Chris-the-slimy-git experience that he’d forgotten the qualities he’d always possessed, like a good sense of humour. He gave Tom a smile, had it returned, and they headed for the bus.

Sam spent the afternoon in bed—alone—listening to the football commentary over his phone and catching up on some sleep after the previous late night. Tom said Clive and he were probably going to watch a film: they’d invited him to go along but Sam had said he needed forty winks, which was true although not the entire reason for dipping out. He recognised that Tom had filial duties to execute while Clive had paternal ones. They’d meet again for dinner and would probably go to the evening’s show, which was Motown themed, so that was something to look forward to. Who didn’t enjoy a bit of the Four Top or Smokey Robinson?

As it turned out, not one of the three enjoyed the show. It didn’t help that the theatre was freezing, great Arctic draughts coming up the stairwell outside to the point that Sam had suggested they go and get their coats to wear, which they did. Along with their hats and gloves. The other members of the audience laughed at them, at first, but within a few minutes others were following suit.

“Looks like we’re setting a trend,” Clive said. “Could be all the rage in the West End soon.”

“We could start our own fashion chain.” Tom sniggered. “All weather gear suitable for the Palladium. A sort of Orvis crossed with Dolce and Gabbana.”

The arrival onstage of one of the entertainment reps—an upmarket version of a redcoat—signalled the show was about to start. It needn’t have bothered.

Ten minutes in, Sam had decided this was by far the worst thing he’d seen or heard on the ship.

Fifteen minutes in, he was sure it was the worst thing he’d seen or heard anywhere, and that included his niece’s school show. Tom and Clive’s tortured expressions suggested they felt the same.

Twenty minutes in, Sam was desperately trying to work out an escape plan, when rescue unexpectedly came in the form of part of the scenery collapsing and the show having to be halted.

The upmarket redcoat reappeared to say they’d resume in five minutes, but by then Sam had made up his mind to go. Tom’s grimace and a jerk of his head towards the exit suggested they were thinking the same.

“God almighty, that was awful,” Clive said once they were out of the theatre doors. Given that Sam hadn’t heard the bloke use worse language than “ruddy” he must have been horrified. “I need a stiffener.”

“Don’t we all?” Tom replied, and ushered them towards the lifts.

They'd no sooner started their ascent towards the bar and a hot toddy, when a voice came over the tannoy. "The Northern Lights have just appeared again."

"Again?" Tom said. "We've missed them because of watching that crap?"

Clive patted his arm. "Don't get your hopes up. They were displaying over the ship last night as well, and there were no more than the same white wispy sludge we saw. Although we might as well go and have a look. We're toggled up, anyway."

They exited the lift on the top deck, joining a small but steady group of people filing towards the outside doors. Sam felt the excitement building, that Christmas morning feeling when you poke and prod your stocking in the dark, trying to guess what Santa's left and hoping it'll be what you want, even if it wasn't what you asked for. When they got on deck would they find the equivalent of a battery operated car—the full display—or the white wispy sludge corresponding to the naff present aunties have a tendency of giving you?

"Bloody hell." Clive stopped in his tracks as they stepped outside. "Oh, sorry." He moved aside as a woman came up behind him huffing and complaining.

"Let's go up to the walkway. Fewer people there." Sam could barely get the words out. He could barely get up the stairs, either, eyes drawn to the celestial riot going on in the sky. Whatever he'd expected the Northern Lights to be, it wasn't this. Psychedelic green was strewn across the sky, splitting and reforming, like an angelic child was being let loose in heaven with a paint brush. Then the light show faded, leaving a ghost of itself on Sam's retinas, and the sky was dark once more.

"Wow," was all he could manage, while Clive just stood looking skyward, dumbstruck.

"It's got to come back," Tom said. "Even if I wait here all night I have to see this again."

Everybody must have felt the same, given the swelling crowd, although that wasn't as large as Sam expected it to be. Still, if you were at a show or dancing or in a rowdy bar you wouldn't have heard the tannoy. Sam thought of the rest of the theatre audience, sitting waiting for the tripe to resume and missing out on the show of their lives. People didn't have to wait long. First came the thin wispy cloud they'd seen the previous night, then the colours appeared and deepened.

"They're supposed to dance, sometimes," Clive whispered. "The locals reckon they sing, too. I'd settle for—" If he was about to say he'd settle for the dancing, Clive was getting his wish.

Sam tried to find words to be able to describe it when he messaged his mother, later, but this defied description. Like curtains wafting in the breeze, yet not quite. Smoke from a bonfire, catching the breeze, almost. Notes on a stave that moved up and down of their own volition. Like the lights on the walls of the church he'd been in that morning. Thank God he'd taken a picture of those after the service ended.

"Sarah loved to dance," Clive said, when the display began to fade once more. "She'd call me a silly sod for saying this, but I can't shake off the idea of her sitting up in heaven orchestrating everything. Making the theatre cold so we already had our coats on, then getting the scenery to fall apart so we could escape."

"It wouldn't surprise me. Mum loved doing stuff for other people. She created the best Christmases that anyone ever had." Tom choked back a tear. "She always said *she* was never happier than when she saw happy faces all around her."

"I know, I know," Clive said, and pulled Tom in for a hug. Sam started to back off, ready to let father and son share this important moment, but he felt an arm—Clive's, which wasn't what he'd expected—dragging him into a three-way embrace. One that was salted with plenty of tears and a generous proportion of giving consolation and being consoled.

Eventually they had to break the clinches, not least because they were getting in the way of other people.

"I'll go down and watch the rest from our cabin, son," Clive said. "You two make the most of it." He patted them both on the back and left.

The show continued, the lights fading and returning, flashing and dancing across the sky. Sam watched them, entranced, until the aching from his toes reminded him he was getting too cold.

"I could do with a hot drink," he told Tom, "but I don't want to miss this. May never get the chance to see them again."

"You've got a balcony, like us and a kettle in your room, too. Maybe we could make ourselves a coffee and watch the lights through the doors?"

If that was a subtle way of Tom getting to be alone—properly alone—with Sam, or if it was exactly what it purported to be, a cuppa and more lights watching, who cared. Tonight was magic enough and all the rest could take care of itself.

It turned out it was a bit of both. They had a cuppa, watched the aurora come and go, then toggled up to go outside again, onto the balcony.

"I never thought it would be as good as this," Tom said.

"Bloody amazing." Sam felt an arm snake around his waist.

"You're bloody amazing, too. I didn't expect to come on this trip and find a bloke like you."

"You took the words right out of my mouth." Sam leaned into the embrace. "Sorry if I've been a bit stand-offish. I'm getting over a break up and I didn't want to get involved with anyone on the rebound."

Tom chuckled. "And there was me thinking I was the one who was acting hard to get. Same here. What kind of an idiot was your bloke to let go of a guy like you?"

"Chris-the-slimy-git? An idiot who couldn't keep his zip fastened. That sort of thing's okay if you're into open relationships, but I'm not."

"Glad to hear it." Tom nuzzled Sam's cheek, which was about the only part of him not covered.

"There was a slimy git in my life, too. He naffed off about a week before we set sail. He's texted me every day apologising and wanting to get back together but I've told him where to stick his apologies. Once trust is gone you can't get it back."

"Too right." Sam took Tom's arm, guiding him back into the cabin where he could peel back the layers on their faces and kiss him properly.

"Yeah, your bloke certainly had no brain," Tom said, when they finally broke apart.

"He had a brain. Trouble was, it was in his pants." Time for another snog.

Tom eventually leaned back, taking Sam's hands in his then turning to look through the window to where the celestial light show was still going strong. "Are we going to keep in touch, when we get home?"

"Of course we are, you daft bugger. This isn't a shipboard romance." And it wasn't going to be a one-night stand, either. Sadly, as far as Sam's conscience was concerned, this wasn't going to be *any* sort of stand tonight. "This is going to sound like the brush off, but it isn't. Listen. Your dad. He shouldn't be on his own tonight. I mean, I fancy you like nobody's business and if it were just the two of us I'd have you in here every night."

"You'd have me, would you?" Tom wriggled closer. "You'll wait until you're offered."

Sam sniggered. "Your body's offering me right now."

“It’s been ready for you since that dancing lesson.” Tom gave him another kiss, but it was sweeter this time, less heated. “You’re right about Dad, though. I’ve been thinking the same. Thanks for being so understanding.”

“Understanding’s what I do best. Apart from what I do in bed. I’m gold standard at that, too.”

“Show off. I’ll hold you to proving that.” Tom stepped back, gazing at Sam by the aurora’s faint light.

“Dad’s going to give me hell and say I shouldn’t be fussing over an old geezer like him when I could be out having fun but at heart he’ll appreciate the gesture we’ll be making. It won’t hurt us to wait. It might hurt him to be alone. Anyway, he’s such a romantic he’ll probably insist I spend the last night of the cruise in your cabin, so we probably won’t have to wait long.”

Sam nodded. “I’ll think of it like the run up to Christmas morning. It’s all that anticipation makes the presents so good.”

“Yeah. When you get what you asked for and it feels as good as when you sent Santa your list.” Tom gave him a final kiss then let go of his hands. “See you tomorrow.”

“You will indeed.”

And as often after that as Sam could wangle. Tom was the present he’d needed, even if it hadn’t been asked for.

Author’s note: If you’re thinking that the events leading up to Sam, Tom and Clive seeing the Northern Lights are far-fetched, they aren’t. That’s exactly what happened to us in the spring of 2018. The cold, the coats, the terrible show, the scenery falling apart, the announcement in the lift. Real life is, so often, odder than fiction.