

MISREMEMBER ME

by

Alex Kiesig

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Boise State University

December 2013

© 2013

Alex Kiesig

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

DEDICATION

For Vicki and for Molly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people read many versions of the story and were kind, patient, and helpful over the years, but without Mitch Wieland, this would not be a book but a wishful idea.

ABSTRACT

An American travels to Crete with his English ex-girlfriend in *Misremember Me*, a modern novel in the tradition of the Lost Generation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
POSEIDON.....	1
THE CITY ACROSS THE WATER.....	26
ELOUNDA LAGOON	63
CAFÉ AOUAS.....	106
ONCE.....	127
CAFÉ AOUAS, CONTINUED	165
PROBABLY THE BAR IN THE WORLD	180
THE HOPE	205
FUNERREAL.....	236
THE ISLE OF TEARS.....	252
NOSTOS AND ALGOS	274
KATHARO.....	299
EVER FALLEN IN LOVE.....	309

POSEIDON

SHE COLLAPSED. I reached for her and she fell away from me, into the bed, escaping my touch. Whoo, she said as she landed, less a word than a soft sound she released into the air. I said her name and she looked around, not at me. There was no clock in the room. It was our second night on Crete together, and we were both very far from home.

Emma, I said again.

She said, It's too late.

It won't be any different tomorrow, I said.

She looked down at the bed, where her hands smoothed the sheets. She watched them as though they belonged to someone else, and the sound they made on the sheets was like last breath. Then she remembered they were her hands, and she twisted a lock of blonde hair into a curl. She looked up, not at me but beyond me, through me, her blue eyes wet and unfocused, the light in them darkening, receding as shorelight from a night ship set out to sea. We had been apart for three years, and now we were together in a place I had never been.

I stepped back and lost my center, went forward, and she caught my wrist. She pressed my fingers into the heat of her sunburned skin at her throat, and the taste of her sweat exploded in my memory. I got my legs back under me.

She said, What do you want, Alex?

I hate you when you're this drunk, I said.

She pulled back. Well, she said. You can just fuck off then.

I went out. From our bungalow, emerging into the warm sea air, and up the stone steps to the hotel bar. If there were stars in the sky, I could not focus to find them. The bungalows were pushed at odd angles into the mountainside high above the bay, like catacombs, and the walkway took me over some of the rooftops and under a tall turret and the flicker of television light, past the hanging boughs of fig and lemon and olive, the fruit lost in shadows. Jasmine flowered in the salted wind, sweet with the smell of the marina on the far shore. White linens on lines flapped softly, damp to touch, and I ducked between two sheets, swaying, and got my weight going in the right direction again, forward and up the steepening path. Bouzouki music led me to the lobby, a separate building at the top of the hotel, where the hillside met the road.

In the distance I could hear talking and laughter, and I laughed too. It all seemed very funny. Splashes echoed at the swimming pool, louder than the voices but not the laughs. I passed vacant bistro tables on cobblestone, and from under one, a long-faced cat watched me go by.

A caged gray parrot with a blaze of orange tailfeathers stood guard at the lobby's wide doors, and inside, a vine-draped fountain gurgled. The songs in the bar were the same as what we had been listening to earlier in the evening when everyone was happy and dancing, the same songs as the night before. Now I was the last one

awake, and it was another song for dancing, though tonight only music filled the room. A disco song, too loud. *Won't you take me to... Funkytown... Won't you take me to...*

The bartenders prowled the length of the bar, and I found. My cigarettes were waiting for me with a half-gone bottle of Dutch beer. The hotel did not have draft beer, and only Heineken, Amstel, and a Greek beer called Mythos in bottles, the same as the other places I'd seen on Crete the last two days. The bartenders poured drinks for each other from a spigot at the base of a two-foot-tall bottle of ouzo, bobbing their dark heads to the music and turning with hope to the empty room. Through the windows on the far side of the vacant dance floor, the faraway streetlights and neon of Aghios Nikolaos streaked reflection across the bay. I drank and rested my folded arms on the bar. Just me.

The bartender called Manolis leaned down next to me. His eyes stuck out like bulbs, and now, late in that time where night was turning into something else, the lids were heavy and sloughing away. Tomorrow was his day off.

You are not so happy, my American friend, he said.

I waved him off. Manolis produced a pack of cigarettes from under his apron and opened it, tilting them to me. I pointed to my own pack, flipped the lid, and tapped out a cigarette for myself. Assos International. To call them cigarettes was an act of generosity. The word cigarette suggests lightness, a lilting dainty quality. Assos had no such trait. They were like the black engine fire of a roadside breakdown. I'd bought them at the airport kiosk in Heraklion, and when Emma saw me smoking them, she said she liked my authenticity, and so I bought a new pack of

Assos the next day too. But I longed for the easy chemical rush of an American Camel Light.

It is problems with the womens, Manolis said in a way that meant he was thinking of other things, perhaps getting his teeth cleaned. He looked to his partner, Nikos, who nodded to the music's beat. Manolis lit mine and then a cigarette for himself.

I pulled a money clip of drachmas from my pocket and flipped through the colorful bills, the numbers on each ludicrously large, the faces of men I did not know. Play money. I spent it as if I were playing a game.

One Amstel, please, I said and placed a note for the appropriate amount on the bar.

Manolis set a bottle in front of me and cranked off the cap. Five hundred drachmas, he said to himself as he swept up my money. He went to the register and slid it in the drawer with many of the other bills I'd given him, and he tapped his knuckles on the bar.

Manolis went to the stereo at the other end of the bar and changed the music. He chose something different but exactly the same. Do you like Bryan Adams? he said.

I shrugged.

Manolis nodded at his choice. He said, The Englishwoman, Emma. She is back in your room?

I told him that she was.

She is very beautiful woman. She is too much beautiful.

Too beautiful for me?

No, no, my friend, Manolis said. I will explain to you the way of things. I know many things about the womens. The beautiful ones will not make the childrens. Manolis leaned close to me and his bulging eyes did not avoid mine.

She already has a son, I said.

Your son?

No.

Manolis made a face struck with pity, and I wanted to stab my lit cigarette into one of those eyes. But I had that new beer in front of me. Manolis said, Here is the problem. I know all about this. She will always have someone else, her son.

I cut him off. Look, I said and that was all.

I drank. Coming into the bar were an English couple I'd spoken to earlier in the evening and at the end of last night, though I could not remember details, nor could I stir up their names. They took stools next to me, all smiles, attractive and well-matched. The man leaned into the bar, square-jawed and handsome with dramatic boomerang eyebrows. Now he raised them to acknowledge me and ran his hand through his dark movie star hair, then gave a small wave to signal Manolis. Manolis dealt cocktail napkins to the couple, and I remembered my easy dislike for the man who'd just sat down. He was, in fact, a movie star, now on a BBC hospital drama I'd never seen. I had my own ideas about art and the British. Now we were just people in a bar.

The girlfriend's face entered through the right of my narrowing frame, olive-skinned and almond-eyed, with liquidy dark bobbed hair and unnaturally red lips that looked wine-darkened, almost blue at the edges. Her eyes lifted to mine, chocolatey and warm and a little drunk.

Oh, dear, Alex, she said in her West London accent. You're still here. Has Emma given up on the evening?

I remembered and said her name. Raja.

What's that? she said.

Your name, I said and smiled. I like the sound of your name. Where are you from?

From London, dear, she said.

Go on, I said.

My mother's French and my father's from Tunisia, she said and I loved the way she pronounced it, *Tunizziah*, and I asked her to say it again. She shook her head at me, the hair falling out and back in place in a distinctly female way. I knew her hair would smell like rosemary and oranges before I actually smelled it. And then she leaned forward for just a moment to adjust her skirt under her terrifically formed legs, and her hair did smell like rosemary and oranges. Gerald Coulthard of the BBC had this woman's hair fanned out like a raven-wing on the pillow next to him every morning.

So where is your girlfriend, then? Raja said.

She's in bed, I said and reached for my cigarette. I said, But not my girlfriend.

But I thought, *we* thought, you two were a couple, Raja said.

Were, yes, I said.

Oh, dear.

You're the American professor, Gerald said.

For goodness sake, Gerald, we went through all that last night. Remember.

Raja patted Gerald's forearm.

Hurrah for holiday, eh, mate, Gerald said and dropped his hand onto Raja's bare knee below the bar. Lovely, isn't she?

Raja stiffened. Oh, piss off, Gerald, she said. Tend to your drink. We're trying to have a conversation here.

Right, right, Gerald said.

Hurrah for holiday, I said.

I said, I might not exactly remember the specifics of the end of last night, either. And I teach, yes. But I'm no professor.

Gerald leaned in and said, *The History of Death and Dying in the American West*. See? I am fully aware. And you wrote a book.

Oh! Raja said to me. Tell us a story—something particularly gruesome.

It's not that kind of book, I said. It's just the history of a cemetery in my hometown.

But surely you know a story or two, Raja said.

I said, Here's one: nothing lasts forever.

Heard that one already, Raja said. Not gory enough.

Alright, how about: everyone is haunted.

There's a start. More drinks, straight away!

I don't know what sort of story I told. One thought led to another, to dead end thoughts, and I backed out into the lanes that had led me there and could not remember where I was going or from where I had come. But Raja looked terrific, and there were parts of her that moved in a way that let me know she was interested in whatever it was that I was saying. Moments like that have a certain kind of pull toward the next moment, where there is a destiny of physical collision. It did not matter what I was saying, we were going to touch. She was smiling past my dumb story, smiling at that next turn of events. Suddenly I heard what was coming out of my mouth, and it was, In a sealed casket, in six months, an embalmed body turns into nothing but yellow slime on the bones.

This was what I was saying?

Fantastic! Raja said, and then she took my hand and held it on my own leg and seemed very drunk to me now as she grinned at me and giggled. Gerald and Manolis were wiping their mouths, dropping their shot glasses on the bar, and on the air was a waft of licorice. Now Raja turned to Gerald and shook her hair and it fell from where she'd hooked it behind her ears, her hand disappearing from my touch, forgotten, and we were reset in space, our bodies apart, and her hand looked around on the bar for something to drink. She said to me, What were you saying?

She asked and so I told her. I must have wanted to talk, just hear myself talk, just to say things that someone else wanted to hear. I do not know how it is for other people, but when I have told a story once it is suddenly built into me, forever, ready to tell again, and it does not matter if it is a story worth telling. Sometimes I am not paying attention to anything and I realize I am halfway into a story I did not realize I remembered, and that I am telling it, and its discovery is as good as if I hadn't been a part of it, and there are other times when the same thing occurs and I am shocked with how boring my story is.

Then Raja asked about what was happening now, and Gerald faded into his beer. I told them I had come to England for research and decided to look up Emma, my ex. Emma had moved back to London from the states three years ago after we had parted. When I called her, she came to meet me where I was staying in Covent Garden, and we ate lunch standing outside a kebab shop, chili sauce running down our forearms, and then we went out to Highgate Cemetery to see Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer. Emma said she'd forgotten something about me. That was how she put it. After that she came to see me every day, and I was sure that she was—again, and finally—madly in love with me. For ten days or so. I didn't do any research. I spent evenings with Emma, at expensive hotel bars, and in inexpensive Russian vodka bars, and the pub chasing prawn crisps with cider. Then Emma asked me to come to Crete, on a vacation she'd already planned. I was a surprise, and she didn't want to leave me in London. I told Raja I liked the rain in London.

Your time is up, Gerald said, his chin practically on the bar.

The ten days are over, is what he means, Raja said.

It appears so.

What's gone wrong?

Before she lived in America, she lived here, in Elounda, a little town a few miles from here, I said. She was in love with someone here. And whatever happened here was the thing that sent her packing to America. And eventually, I suppose, to me.

Raja said, Whyever did she bring you here?

I told her I didn't know. Raja and I talked and smoked our way through my pack of Assos. Bottles appeared and disappeared, and we set out money and laughed when we were lucky enough to have randomly picked out the correct amount. Raja and Gerald had been in Greece for almost a week, hopping from one island to the next, and it was their second night on Crete, same as me and Emma. Raja was composed, but I was fast following Gerald's tired fade. My ability to make decisions had gone—perhaps to bed, I thought and had a private laugh.

What's funny? Raja asked, smiling and ready to be in on the joke. Her smile was thrilling. There were many visibly thrilling things about Raja.

Do you want to kiss? I said into her ear. Gerald won't notice.

I thought we'd all made friends here, she whispered. You wouldn't do that to a friend, would you? And he is my boyfriend.

Who's your boyfriend? I said, my mouth close to her neck.

Raja pulled back and slapped my knee. Seriously, Alex, she laughed.

Gerald was licking beer off his wrist when a hand clapped me on the back. Someone behind me said, My friend!

I turned to see a fat man sitting at the bar who was not my friend. I'd not noticed him come in. I had never seen him before, but it was entirely possible we'd had a deep, meaningful conversation at some point earlier in the night. Yes, I said.

My friend! What is your name?

I told him. He told me his name was Chaim, and he put his thick wallet on the bar. His voice split the music.

Kime, I said and turned to make the introduction to Raja and Gerald, but Gerald had his mouth on Raja's shoulder.

No. The man next to me made a sound deep in his throat. *Kkhhime*.

Ah.

My friend, you will go to another bar with me? It is a very, very nice place.

I did not want to move. Chaim told me about himself. He said he was a lawyer, from Israel, Tel Aviv. I watched him talk. He had dark skin and no facial hair. He was easily twice my age, but childish. He spoke with no control over volume, and his hands made wild shapes to match his words. In the air he produced a cube, a butterfly, a pair of six-shooters. We spoke of politics and law. Behind me Raja and Gerald were touching noses. Chaim opened his wallet and showed me his Israeli bar membership card. He asked again if I'd go to another bar with him. He made a joke.

Bar for drinking, he said. Not bar of lawyers.

I drank. Gerald and Raja could not be expected to entertain me for much longer. And Emma was back at the room.

Sure I'll go with you, I said to the Israeli.

Chaim's hand clapped my shoulder. Very good! The taxi is here in twenty minutes!

I returned to Gerald and Raja, and Gerald squinted at me, no longer recognizing who I was. After some piece of time, which may or may not have been five minutes, Chaim said over my shoulder, Fifteen minutes! Then, Ten minutes! Five minutes, very soon!

Raja asked me, Are you sure you want to go with that bloke?

I said, You take care of Gerald.

Be careful, Raja said. It's something everyone says, isn't it?

I will be, anyway.

Then the taxi driver was in the bar and I said goodbye to Gerald and Raja, and Chaim waved for me to hurry. I followed him out to the road and the Mercedes idling in the horseshoe driveway. Only one road, which wound around the harbors and climbed mountains and clung to rock faces. East was Aghios Nikolaos and west was Elounda. The driver said a ride to either town was fifteen hundred drachmas, and I had that much. And money for drinks. I didn't ask where we would go. I climbed in the back, Chaim rode shotgun, and the car leaped out on the road. East.

We moved at insane speed. We overtook slower cars, riding up into the little vans and jeeps ahead of us until there was nowhere else for them or us to go unless we

meant to go straight through or over them, when finally the other cars would cede and drift to the yellow line, and we would race into oncoming traffic, the flaming attack of headlights, and then just back into our lane as the cars flared past. We passed cars around bends and blind corners. They all drove this way. A man on a vespa pulled alongside us, his vacant head bobbing without worry, and slipped easily ahead just as an oncoming taxi passed in a blur. Our headlights brought out white wooden dollhouses on the left side of the road, at the edge of a drop which no one could survive.

Shrines, Chaim said and turned back to me. We sped forward down the sharp carving mountainside. He said, The people here immortalize someone stupid enough to drive off the road into the sea. Idiots immortalizing other idiots. Are you going to be sick, my friend?

I shook my head no.

Are you sober?

My head turned in wider sweeps. No. I am well beyond sober.

This is okay, Chaim said. You do not need to think. You only need to think with your dick.

Excuse me?

When we get there, you do not need to worry, Chaim said. I pay for the drinks, I pay for the girls. For my friend. Chaim then spoke to the taxi driver in Greek, and the man snorted and replied and laughed.

It is a very, very nice place. It is the best one. All Russian girls. None of them speak English. Boy do I like that!

As the taxi raced down toward the starry lights of Aghios Nikolaos and the liquid reflection on the harbor, I leaned my head back. Chaim was still speaking and I was not listening.

What I had told Raja in the bar was a lie. I had not gone to London to win Emma back, but I had gone to see her. It was all very funny. I laughed aloud, and Chaim laughed, not caring what about, and the taxi driver laughed. I had come thousands of miles, and right now the way it was with me and Emma was just like it had been three years ago—drunk, the distance between us growing in the darkness.

THE TAXI TOOK A SHARP TURN and we were there. The Poseidon. *Posidonio*, in low green neon. It looked like any other bar or restaurant I'd seen on Crete, a collection of large white connected boxes. Except there were no other buildings around it. Any English tourist might stop there, for souvlaki or squid or ouzo.

We got out and went in. The driver too. Electric blue light fell on us and stuck to us, the kind of light that makes white clothes or blonde hair vibrate and glow. There was loud music, songs sung in a language I did not know. A buzz like insects. And there were girls everywhere. Girls on small black stages ringed with blue neon, pressing themselves into brass poles and into the faces of the men sitting around them. Girls on stools at the bar with crossed bare legs. Girls sitting, leaning on round glass tabletops, shoulders hunched with ennui. Many of them had skin that took the blue

light. They smoked and looked at us, and a girl with white hair dipped her fingers in her drink and stuck them between her lips. This, I thought, would be the one for Chaim.

A man greeted Chaim and we moved to the middle of the room. The man would point to a girl, and she would come to us and press herself into Chaim's side. She'd play with his shirtcollar and blow into his ear. Chaim would shake his head and the girl would return to her place, the performed interest in the fat Israeli suddenly gone, and the man would point to another girl. I retreated to an empty stool at the bar, facing the room to watch Chaim and the taxi driver and the owner.

Drink? yelled a girl behind me.

The girl had short red hair and a white oval face. I asked her, Do you have raki?

You want raki?

Yes.

She returned with a carafe and a shot glass which she set on the bar. The other man will pay?

I told her he would and she left again and did not come back. I tipped the bulb to the shot glass and poured the clear liquid into it. Some spilled. Emma had told me once the locals were said to use raki as lighter fluid in a pinch. Something about extracting the liquor from the fermenting skins of grapes already pressed for wine. It was a drink meant for sipping, if drinking at all. I took the shot whole and coughed

fiercely. The backs of my eyes sizzled. I swung my knees around and my body followed.

Chaim had made his selection and she stood in the loop of his arm, her body on his but her eyes gone, aloof, fluttering with memory. She was the one who'd sucked on her fingers. The obvious, garish, pornographic choice. Her hair was white. She had white skin like dough and almost no eyes. The taxi driver was gone. Chaim came to me. What is the matter?

I cleared my throat, moved close to his ear, and said, This isn't really my thing.

He pointed to another girl. That one, he said. The girl sat up.

No, I said.

He waved the girl over. What does your dick tell you to do?

Right now, not much.

Then the girl was next to me and Chaim stepped away. A long girl in a small black dress, not a woman. Her face was in shadow and my eyes strained to see.

Hello, I said.

She leaned in. In a sharp accent, said, You speak English?

Yes.

She smiled with painted wet red lips. Her teeth glowed in the light, and now I could see she was very beautiful.

Where are you from? I asked, choosing anything over what we were clearly supposed to be doing.

Rumania.

There was a pause. I asked, Don't you think this is strange?

What?

I repeated my question.

I do not understand.

Don't you think it's strange? That if I gave you money you would have sex with me, I said.

She blinked and held out her hands. She showed me there was nothing in them. She opened her mouth, the lips, but made no words. Her teeth were perfect and straight and blue. We watched our shoes and said nothing. She did not wear stockings. Her toenails were the same red as her lips. Chaim came back. Well, my friend?

I leaned in very close, whispered a loud rasp, a lie, into his ear. I don't think any of the girls are pretty enough.

Beauty is not everything here. The best one I ever had, she had the face of a potato.

I'm sure.

Chaim bit his lower lip. He pointed to another girl. But that one there does anything.

The young woman was standing by me and watching Chaim, and she had no reaction to him.

True love, I said.

This one likes you, Chaim said to me.

My understanding is that that does not matter.

Chaim laughed. You are catching on quickly, my friend.

Then Chaim leaned away from me and spoke into the girl's ear. He spoke Greek. She nodded. She said, Natalia.

I am not ready to go, Chaim said to me. Have more to drink. Natalia will show you the place.

I did not need to see the place. Chaim went back to the blonde girl in the middle of the room, and the owner came to them. Natalia took my hand and pulled me from my barstool. Her fingers were cold. She could not have been more than eighteen. We went up a flight of stairs and I walked behind her and watched the way she climbed the steps in her tall shoes. She moved effortlessly, and she seemed young and old at the same time.

A row of closed doors led into darkness. From the rail we could see down through the smoke to the main floor. An airplane above the clouds. There were other men in the bar, now I could see, and they stood with drinks, elbows bent, leering at the women. No man looked at another man. They were invisible to each other. Chaim sat at a table with girls in an array. The blonde one. A brunette in red, a gorge of fake cleavage rising up through the neck of her dress. Chaim slapped the table like a stupid child and another brunette slid her hand inside the back of his shirt sleeve to his arm, blind to the women's deep, visceral apathy.

Further across the room, behind the bar where my empty raki glass still sat, a glass jellyfish pulsed with cloudy ether, its tendrils stiff clear flutes. Something Poseidon might have ruled. I held onto the rail, and Natalia touched my shoulder. Then she put her cold hand on my ribs and I turned to meet her body as it moved against mine. She smiled. She was wearing pearl earrings. She kissed me with icewater cold lips and I closed my eyes and kissed her. I held onto the rail, and her hand stayed on me and the only way I touched her was with my mouth. She smelled of soap.

She uncoiled my fingers and took me down the hall. A door opened just ahead and a girl with mannish blonde hair stepped from its light in only her underwear and stockings and heels. When she came into our darkness, the blacklight made the outline of her shapes luminous, her garter and brassiere glowing so the rest of her could disappear. She lit a cigarette and passed us, bored, a million miles away, like anyone on a cigarette break from her job. An actress between takes. Her eyelids flashed blue.

We passed the room she had left and its door was open wide, lit inside bright and harsh, where a man lay on the bed and a girl was sitting across his face, naked, brown nipples pointing to the floor, shuddering like slapped fat. Her dress was pushed up from her thighs and pulled down from her chest to make a useless wreath of cloth at her waist. She jerked painfully to some idea of music slower than that playing in the bar, tossing her hair around, gritting her teeth. The man's scalp showed pale yellow through his own hair. It lacked the shadows and intensity and mystery of a bordello, and instead seemed like the most ordinary domestic scene. The searing odor

of ammonia, like kept animals, burned through the perfumed oils and dank cologne and old cigarette smoke, and my stomach curdled. As we passed I could see another man with heavy ringed eyes reclined in a folding chair, trousers piled around his ankles, holding himself, acne on his white thighs. They were all as far away from me, as unreal, as television. A face appeared from behind the door, another girl, her lips purple and split like burst sausages. She peered out into the hallway with sore eyes and back inside, and she pushed the door closed, and before it slipped softly into its latch, the man in the chair was looking at me.

Come inside, Natalia said and opened the next door.

She took me into the dark room. The door closed and then something clicked and Natalia was standing in the lavender-amber light of a floorlamp with her hand up under its shade. She turned on no other light. Around us were piles of clothes on the floor, and on the nightstand was a full, stinking ashtray, a half-drunk Coca-Cola bottle, the darkened core of a green apple crawling with ants.

Sit down.

I sat on the end of the bed, and the old blanket released a strong human smell as I came down onto it. I moved a crust of bread away from me, to the edge, and brushed away the crumbs and beachsand and flaked-away dry skin of other men. Natalia was in her routine and did not notice and faced a long, cheap mirror on the wall, unzipped her dress, and smoothed it off her pale shoulders, a motion performed too quickly to seem unpracticed. It fell away as though liquid on her skin. There was no sound in the room, but the pulse of something like sound against the door. She wore nothing underneath her dress except a black garter, which, alone, slashed against

her pale skin, made me think of mourning. I watched her and her reflection. Her white skin, half of her made into shadow. She took a step backward, her right foot behind the left, and stood that way, presenting her soft bottom and the deep dimples above it to me, not once thinking about the half-written letters kicked under the bed, the empty vodka bottle from earlier that night floating messageless in the overflowing wicker wastebasket, the smudged whorls of grime that grew from the orange water leaks in every corner of the room, rust waterfalls streaked from ceiling to floor and into musty slicks on the tile. She lifted her hair from her face and twirled it on top of her head and let it down, watching me watch her the whole time in the warbling surface of the mirror. I leaned forward. Felt my forehead, the heat there. Everything was numb and buzzing and slippery.

I'm sorry, I said.

Her reflection looked at me.

I'm very drunk, I said.

Her shoulders lowered and she sighed and clapped her hips. She sat down on the bed and fell back, collapsing back into the filth of this world, a poof of human dust rising around her. Her arms splayed out across the bed. Sighed again. She said something sharp in her own language. I covered her navel with my palm. Her chest filled with air and her breasts rose. I was drunk. She was no longer in the act of performing the fictional dream, and I was sitting in a dark and messy room of a teenage girl. But it was not about me. This was her job.

You're very lovely, I said. If it's about money, I'll pay you anyway.

Cigarette, she said to the ceiling. Do you have one?

I looked at the open pack of Greek cigarettes on the nightstand, and thought that this might not even be her own room, and I took the pack from my shirt pocket. She sat up and propped her elbows on her knees. I put the cigarette between her lips and held the lighter for her. I smoked, too. We smoked and did not speak. There was only the sound of smoke exhaled.

Then she said, It is not an easy thing for you.

She patted my knee.

I don't know what you mean, I said.

Americans can never do it the first time, she said and touched my thigh.

Perhaps it is that I do not thrill you?

No, I said.

Natalia's hand worked up between my legs. Said, I know about these things. There is a thing about love, and it is different than sexual. Someone else? In America? It is okay, she said and whipped her hand away, floating it through the air like a wing.

We smoked another cigarette together and I got up and collected her dress from the floor. When I handed it to her, she gave it back to me, hanging it on my fingertips so she could step into it, and I zipped her up and touched her waist. In the mirror we were a couple admiring ourselves before a night out, domestic and ordinary. I did not know what to do next. I spun her quickly to me and gave her a hug, and at

first her body tensed, but then I felt Natalia's hands open on my shoulderblades. When we parted, I insisted that I give her some money, and she did not refuse.

I opened the door and went out and quickly down the stairs to find Chaim at the bar. He stood smiling among the women, happy that he had shown me this place. I wanted to kick him out of the taxi as soon as we were up high on the hill again, watch him go flying over the edge like the tragic kids on their vespas.

We're going, I said.

Did you have a good time? Natalia? She is something.

I looked up to the second floor. You told me none of the girls spoke English, I said.

Maybe next time will be a better one, my friend, Chaim said. He placed his palms flat on the bar and then slid them forward. A child pushing away a dinner plate scraped clean.

I led the way out. The blackness cooled my eyes. I took a long breath, then got into the taxi and Chaim's girl was back there. The first one, with the white hair. I could see the crotch of her panties. Seafoam green. She crossed her legs and swung her foot and did not acknowledge me.

Chaim opened the front passenger door and sat inside. The owner rested an arm on the roof and leaned in to speak with Chaim and the taxi driver. Five thousand drachmas, he said. Chaim passed the man a bill and the man put it in his shirt pocket. He took money from a different pocket and gave it to the taxi driver. They had a deal. They thanked each other for the business and shared a laugh.

Five hundred drachmas to the pound. One pound sterling was two dollars.
Had I just left Natalia twenty-thousand drachmas?

The girl said, No speck English! Speck Greek! Her voice was a blade.

Chaim gave the owner a single note. Tell the girl no screaming. Now and during. The owner spoke to the girl so she could understand. Chaim said, The tits are good, but what comes out of her mouth is awful. I do not want to hear it.

She looked at Chaim, and then at me. There was something in her small eyes. She did not want to be with Chaim, and in that we became suddenly allied. She wanted me to save her from him. But then it seemed I could not stop what would come of her. Somehow she had come to Crete. Just like Natalia. Just like me.

We drove back to the hotel where Chaim paid the driver five hundred drachmas to return in an hour to take the girl. He walked to the hotel and took in the stars, stretching his legs, holding onto his stomach.

I said to the girl, You don't have to.

Her eyes narrowed to nothing.

I would pay you and you wouldn't have to be with him.

Fuck off, she said and got out of the car. She went to Chaim at the front entrance and he pulled her in at the waist and they went inside.

I went down the path to the hotel, through the lobby to the bar. Manolis and Nikos grinned at me and the grins opened into girlish giggles and then roars. I waved them off. They knew where Chaim had taken me. They had known all along. I said,

Not my thing. You assholes. I sat down and Manolis gave me an Amstel, and I could not help but laugh.

I drank and smoked for awhile longer. I met Russian guests, and I made friends with one, a man called Leonid with bubbly pink scars on his forearms and neck. He had not spoken English in fourteen years, and my English sank to match his. We played pool and talked shit. Cold War very, very bad, I told him and he held me by the shoulders and agreed with my deep wisdom in the most solemn of stares. We drank and saw the girl with white hair come back through the lobby, and it did not seem that an hour had passed. She looked tousled. Not only her hair and dress, but her body, and she wore the disinterest of the other girls at The Poseidon Chaim had not chosen. Her movements jangled like an animated skeleton. Rolling bones. Leonid looked at her. I could not know if he knew what she was, or if he was hungry for all that white skin.

At some time, Manolis turned the lights down on the bar and I said goodbye to my Russian friends. I got a hug from Leonid. If only our countries drink together, Leonid said.

I walked back to the room. The door creaked when I opened it. My shoes squeaked. I went in. A lamp was on, lighting the room through its striped yarn shade. Emma lay on the bed, moved only inches from where she landed. She'd taken off her top but not her skirt or shoes. Half-naked and snoring softly and nearly perfect, hair fanned over the pillow. I stood by her. Then I went to the other room, to my room, and sat on the bed.

THE CITY ACROSS THE WATER

I WOKE to the sound of her. Bare feet kissing the tile and then a closing door. There were morning sounds, whistling birds and people talking as they only do in a new day, playful and buoyed by possibility. I sat up in bed. The room was bright and charged full of air, and through the thrown-open arched panes of the window came a Greek pop song, a woman singing in English over the jangle of a two-thousand-year-old tune. The pane of sky framed by the window was almost white, its vastness cut across by a bough of white stone and a drape of vines, and out through the vines was a range of hills, far, far away, across the water that now I could not see. The hills were hazy and flat and leached out color into the sky. It hurt my eyes to look out into that white sky for too long, and I lay back down.

The bed was not a bed but a leaden mattress on a stone platform that came out from the white stone wall, and the room was not really another room but a space next to the kitchenette. On the table sat an empty bottle of wine, an open handbag, a tube of cocoa butter on its cap. I did not remember wine, but the taste of cigarettes was in my mouth, and my throat was a collapsed chimney. I did not get up and have another one, but lay there instead and ran my eyes along the seams in the ceiling. The lamp a wrought iron ring of sconces. The red rug on the wall next to me. The arches of the window and the door, both stark cobalt blue against the white of the room. My

trousers were in a pile below the window on a stone bench, another part of the same platform on which I lay.

Suddenly I was on my feet next to the bed and pulling out new clothes from my suitcase. I stopped, looked at the bed. It was too late to lie down again. I was already standing. I whipped a pair of socks apart. The tile was icy. I pulled on a pair of jeans, patted the pockets, and then the khakis from the night before. I found my cigarettes and a lighter and went to the porch.

Out here were more of the white walls and blue pillars and shutters, wingblades of trees moving slow on a current I could not feel, and the stairs from our bungalow led down to a landing ringed with dark, spiked plants in pots the same color blue as everything else. The sun on every white surface. In the distance were the unreal mountains, joining the sea in a cloud of white glimmer, a million flashes of light, and into that came the dry yellow smoke from the tip of my white Assos cigarette, white as bleached bone in my hand, resting there on my knee. Blue jeans I'd bought three years ago, and three years is a long time. My sunglasses were somewhere else. In the breast pocket of my wool coat, on a hanger on the doorframe of Emma's bedroom in her flat, in New Barnet, North London.

I kept at it. I smoked until I hit the sweet, scorched plastic taste of filter and then I lit another one and smoked that too. I got the empty bottle of wine from the table and tried it for a few warm drops. It tasted of pine. The name for it. Retsina. I needed something more to drink than just that and I needed food, and either would do.

The path took me to the landing and my first vista, but where the water touched shore below me I could not see. Its movement was silent from here. The

hotel was high on the island above Mirabello Bay, and the waves rolled in from somewhere else through the morning haze. White seams of waves and boat wakes. Here the hills revealed themselves to be the island's eastern peninsula, flat as maps in the distance, sweeping across the horizon in a line toward the white and postcard port of Aghios Nikolaos. And now everything by contrast was not white but a spectrum of blue, the colors moving in a continuum from the sea to the hills to the sky and the clouds overhead, and the sun today was a brighter place in the clouds and nothing else.

I climbed toward the hotel and passed through the alley of laundry, under a trellis capped with a spray of long-stemmed flowers with red trumpet cups, below the wide dark canopy of a catalpa like any in my own neighborhood, in Boise, Idaho, six thousand miles away. I passed a thick-trunked pear tree, a dead applewood with two pieces of yellow fruit still hanging, and a tree crowned with weeds, and I stopped at a strange palm the shape of a very long pineapple. I turned toward the sea. Here was a fat man in a sailor's cap at another broad landing and full view again of the peninsula and the town across the water. The man stared not over the bay, but at the blue urn on the stone pedestal in front of him, hands in his pockets. It was Chaim. He turned to me and did not react and looked back to where he had been before. He did not know me. I was not his friend today.

The sun came from behind a cloud and the hills in the distance moved into focus, coming forward, to me, hardening, and the land became separate from the sky and sea. What had seemed five hundred miles away became fifty, then five. The shapes of the brown rocks changed when light hit them, forming steeps and bluffs and tablelands, and ridges of brush appeared, and the shapes came in the way watched

clouds change. And closer, the sleepy pink forms of people around the aquamarine swimming pool began to move. Here there was another fat man in a chair with his forearms laid across his stomach, and around him were loud children and their quiet mothers. Walrus men with faces pressed into beach towels. The lithe, sugary frames of teenage girls laid out on deck chairs. It was too early for anyone to swim, but every chair was taken.

Chaim picked up his silver suitcase and climbed past me and to the lobby, leaving me in the wake of his rank cologne. A smell that shot me back to the first slap of his hand on my shoulder. It did not matter whether he ignored me now. Our secret had already been made. Now that we would not speak again, it was secure. I went to Chaim's landing and sat on a curve of bench in front of the urn, out of which stuck the last of a hacked-off cactus. But he had not been looking at the urn. When I looked past it and down through the slats of the vine-wrapped veranda to the pool in front of me, there was a pair of legs, which I knew to belong to Emma Baines-Holmes.

I watched her legs, the calves spread out on the boards of a chaise, toes tipped in toward each other. We had not seen each other for three years before I'd gone to London. Sun ribboned her dark legs, slashed with the slats of the veranda in black shadow. For me there would never again be such a moment as Chaim's, to look upon her for the first time, as now even the sight of her legs pulled me toward some memory. She was formed again before my eyes, coming into focus. In the time apart she had become only a version of herself in my thoughts. Now she was there below me in a reflective gold bikini by the poolside, ten feet below me, in the flesh, and I understood now how much those three words could convey. I had once known every

part of her, and here she was again. We had been in each other's presence now for almost two weeks and no matter how much I saw her, how I tried to know it, it was only fleeting, like now, above the veranda, when she seemed real enough to believe.

Our past was not the perfect fiction that distance and years apart can create. She was married when we were together, and that made things different than the way a couple in love should be. She had met her husband here, on Crete, in the fishing village of Elounda, where he had been on leave from an Air Force base in Italy. He married her and brought her to America, and I met her there, and although I would not have said so then, I did everything I could do to take her from him. She and I did everything a normal couple does. We got a babysitter and went out to nice dinner on our birthdays, and we ate fast food, and made dinner for each other. We went out to parties and spent the whole time only with each other. We got drunk. We sang karaoke together, but just once. We had sex in the afternoon. We were jealous. We argued. We went about the business of being in love just like you do. But we knew we were only acting.

I moved to the rail to see more. Her hair was blonder now than when we'd been together, pulled up off her neck and wound into a loose bun that spilled out long corkscrews of lunar white blonde, caramel blonde, fiery copper blonde. She was tan now, but she always had been, even in winter when she wore bronzer on her face and chest which tasted like nothing on earth except fake orange tan.

I went down one side of the double stairway, past a bush like a nest of birdbeaks and another at the base with leaves like waxy rolled tongues. Two blonde girls stopped giggling as I walked behind them, and they watched me. Under the

veranda was a father with his young blonde son, playing tic-tac-toe in the dust on the cobalt-blue painted tabletop. I'd met the father at the hotel bar. He'd bought me a beer. The son was named Connor. Hello, the father said to me, and his gray mustache spread in a wide smile. I remembered him from the jetway in Gatwick airport in London, his mustache and the blonde son and a fox-faced wife. I waved and looked for the wife, and there she was right next to me, topless on a chaise, bent over and rustling through a wicker beach bag with cane handles, her bare breasts swinging like pink skin hammocks. She looked at me from behind sunglasses. I had spoken to her too in the bar. I'd asked where she was from, and she said, Kent, and that was the only word she said. Hello, I said now, and she said, Hi, and she waited until I went by her to go back to her bag.

I sat on the macadam next to Emma. The smell of sun baking seawater from the rocks. She turned her head sleepily to the side, her eyes flashing open, feral and blue, and my skin flushed with the thrill of her.

Hi, I said.

Hi.

It's nice out. I wish I hadn't slept so long.

Yeah, she said.

How do you feel?

Alright now, Emma said. But I am definitely never going to touch another drop of alcohol.

I know what you mean, I said.

Oh, I mean it. I mean it.

I said, Emma, I'm sure I said some things last night that I didn't mean.

It's alright, she said. I know. Me too.

I can't even remember why we were fighting.

Really, Emma said. That's interesting. She rolled her body toward me, her eyes closing again, and she reached for my hand and I touched each finger between mine. She was twenty-nine years old but still had hands like a girl's, with bitten-short nails and little scrapes and cuts.

I said, You do?

It's nothing. I'd rather not speak of it ever again, actually.

But you're going to hold it against me.

This was all a big mistake on my part, she said. She slipped her top leg down the other and her skin made the sound of skin against skin. Her eyes stayed closed. I held her hand.

I said, We can share the blame.

No, it's on me. I asked you here.

I wanted to come, I said.

Emma finally smiled and moved her fingers and opened her eyes. Anyway, she said, I'm through with the Ag Nik tourist bar scene. I'm going into Elounda tonight to see some old friends.

Oh. Alright.

I just think it might be better if we didn't try to spend every second with each other. At least not right now. When I asked you, I sort of thought that things would be different.

How did you think things were going to be?

I thought we might get on as friends, she said and looked right at me in a damaged way.

We've never been friends.

No.

Is that what we're going to try to be?

Not sure, really.

I suppose it's never too late, I said and it sounded like nothing I would ever say.

Emma blinked, remembering last night. It's too late, her own words. No, she said now. There's always, always time. She nodded and closed her eyes again.

I said, As a friend, would you let me buy you a drink?

Alex, you're joking. My liver is absolutely pickled.

Right, and your promise.

What do you mean? she said and snapped her hand out of mine and sat up, staring suddenly at a mosaic at the east end of the pool. On the wall of the nearest bungalow was the image of dolphins spit out from the sea below a wedge of gulls. Oh, Emma said, the quitting drinking thing. Bugger it.

You'll join me then.

She nodded slowly, her shoulders rising to her neck, still fixed on the mosaic.

Do you have drachmas?

Plenty left over from last night. Be right back.

On the shaded terrace of the poolside café were two men and a woman in dark clothes, the men drinking Greek coffee from tiny cups on saucers. I stood at the stainless steel bar with my money out and waited for someone to help me. The man at the table in the gray turtleneck had long, sneering lips, and he put a cigarette in between them and lit it and looked around. He said something in Russian, and the other man leaned over to him as if to speak, putting all of his weight on one elbow, and then said nothing. They all looked on from behind sunglasses and were dressed well and their faces were composed of the harsh angles of Eastern Europe. The woman turned to look over her shoulder at the sea but was not really looking at anything except away from the men. She had come to the pool table last night and said something to Leonid and gone away.

The man in the turtleneck clacked his silver wedding ring against the arm of his chair, leaning back, looking at himself, maybe something on his stomach. He said, Am concerned. Impatience, he said, and then he said more in Russian.

I purchased two Amstels from the girl behind the bar and took them back to Emma. She sat on the edge of her chaise, forgetting to be uncomfortable with me, and we tapped our bottles together and drank. She held her beer in both hands on her knees.

Tremendous, she said.

I don't know about that, I said.

You think I'm a dreadful bitch, she said as though this were some new idea, gossip that had come back to her from someone else, and her mouth hung open and she laughed once in disbelief.

No, I said.

Emma cast a look of doubt upon me and said, It's only another ten days.

Exactly, I said.

And I think we should just make the most of it, she said.

And then we can go back to our lives and pretend nothing ever happened, I said.

See, this is what I'm talking about, Emma said. She stood, grabbed her towel and her book, and I reached for her. She started away and then flew back to me. Her shoulders shot up and elbows out, and she said to me, I thought it had been enough time, but clearly I was wrong. I have to go get ready.

I didn't mean to upset you, I said.

Well you have. I need to not speak to you right now. You just—just do what you want. You always do.

I did not watch Emma disappear. I felt the flush at my neck, squeezed my eyes closed hard, and let the heat race through me and away before I opened them. When I did, there was my hand on my knee with a lit cigarette that I'd not known I lit. I drank

the rest of my beer without looking up. I grabbed Emma's bottle and stood. There was the fat man in the chair with his arms on his bare box of a belly like a table, his eyes on me, and the blonde teenage girls with their hands over their mouths, and Connor looking to his dad, and his father saying, Shhh. And Connor's mother, with stung-pink breasts spread out to her reclined sides, turning toward me and looking over the bridge of her sunglasses with the sharp fox points of her eyes, and then, politely, away.

A HALF MOON HUNG HIGH in the boundless coming blue night. The hills across the bay, below the moon, had long ago receded from full form, and those to the southwest grayed and the line they formed stood in high contrast to the sky, the sun gone behind them. Closer, a beacon light on the small island in the bay began to pulse. The island was owned by the church of Saint Nikolas, had said Raja Ferjani to me some time the night before, and the nuns took boats out to feed the endangered wild goats, called krikri. But you could see none of that from here. On came the marquee lights of Aghios Nikolaos, and the lights you had not noticed began to emerge—the lights below jewelry in window displays, the red lamps in pastry cases, miles of wound neon tubes, and headlights and taillights moving along the coastline. Each small globe of shoplight touched against another to make a wide halo around the whole street level of the town, and out came oily rainbows of light on the glassy blue of the bay. A lone boat engine pattered. Up the long line from the harbor to the hills, smoke rose from chimneys. The church bell tolled seven, and I realized: Aghios Nikolaos was Greek for Saint Nikolas. Ag Nik, St. Nik. Of course. By the last peal,

where I sat at the edge of the hotel had become lost from light. The night's first mosquito appeared in front of my eyes against the western skyline as though bobbing on a string.

I was the last one outside. My retsina had been gone for a long time but I had stayed at the little bistro table by the pool and smoked. The hotel inside was busy with people, back from their day's adventure and ready to go out on the town. I had only been at the hotel. I stood to put out my last cigarette on the bottom of my shoe and collected my empty wineglass. It was late enough that I could go to the hotel restaurant to eat. Emma would be gone.

Now the houses on the hills and their chimneysmoke had disappeared into a black slope that met the still water, with only little yellow lights like stars to map the roads from the town. They led all along the coastline, toward the west side of the bay and the hotel, and down the hill below me, a snake of streetlight stars looped the church and its glowing orange belfry, then further around the deep bright blue of the next door hotel swimming pool. Everything from here was pristine and miniature, and as I'd sat and drank it was easy to retreat to this distance. But with the night came noise and from the bay. The rise of engines chased headlights, scoring a line through the darkness on up the hill that led to me.

Footsteps tapped on the stone steps behind me, descending the stairs from the lobby, and when they stopped, a woman backlit in theatrical outline stood at the landing above the pool. I took a step toward her shape, the bobbed dark hair and long neck and bare arms inked by the yellow light behind her, and then the lights at the bottom of the pool blinked open and stared up through the warbling water like

winedrunk eyes, which was lucky, because my own eyes had not seen the lip, and I just caught myself from stepping into the pool. Alex is that you? came the voice, and it was Raja. Whatever are you doing all alone at the hotel?

The mosquitoes win, I said. The first words I'd said in hours. Charmless. I went around the pool's deep end and toward her. Swung the wineglass by its stem. Raja walked along the balcony and I met her on the stairs. I said, On my own this evening.

She'll get over it, Raja said from above me. She said, And drinking by yourself in the dark is no way to get your mind off it. Come with me and Gerald, into Ag Nik. Have you eaten?

We met under a burned out lamp, and I still could not see her face. Just the outline of her hair and neck and shoulders, the straps of her dress, the forgotten sunglasses on top of her head. I said, I was just headed in for dinner here.

Here? You wouldn't survive the night. Just come along with us. I'm insisting, Raja said. She turned—she was on the step above mine—and now the reflection of the moon touched her face, and she looked sad.

I said, I'm terrible company right now.

Have you been plotting your course in the universe? Raja said and took the wineglass from my hand one finger at a time and then she looked through the wineglass at me and raised an eyebrow. She said, Sure sign of wine on an empty stomach.

Gerald won't mind?

Not if he thinks he's getting anything between the sheets tonight, he won't.

Right, I said. Right. Do I have time to change.

Meet us at the lobby as fast as you can. We hired a car. How long will it take you?

Two seconds, I said.

Suddenly the lamp above us came on, and all the other lamps in the hotel gardens. Now Raja's face was again in darkness, her outline glowing, and she said brightly, Alex? Is it alright if I ask you something. And it's no affair of mine, at all, so you can just tell me straight away—

Ask anything, I said.

The place you went last night. It was a brothel, yeah?

Indeed it was.

And you... Raja said and swiveled on the step.

Had a drink and came home, I said.

I don't know why I asked, I'm sorry, Raja said. None of my business in the least.

I appreciate the concern.

Because you'd probably want to check directly into hospital, Raja said. See you at the lobby? she said and went up a couple of steps. Her dress was red and cut low, crossed like lattice in the back, and she wore tall flip-flop sandals that made her calves into terrific fists.

Two seconds, I said.

Raja stopped. She returned to me, said, I propose we form an alliance.

Okay, I said.

Secret.

Even better.

You stop trying to convince me that your girlfriend's a bitch, and I'll make sure you don't think about her all night.

I got on the stair with Raja. That's not at all what I was trying to—

Allies? Raja said, extending her hand. Or sworn enemies, she said and slipped the hand behind her back.

Allies, I said and reached out and instead she wrapped her hand around my shoulder and stood on her toes and kissed me on the cheek.

She whispered in a low way, Because I can already tell she's a bitch. And then Raja went off to the lobby, leaving me to digest the cool touch of her fingertips. The sight of her slick calves. The growl of her breath next to my face. The smell of her hand lotion. There were another thousand senses to know.

I retreated to the room and changed. Somehow I still had not eaten, and now the wine hung in the sloshing pail of my stomach, and I threw the glass into the pile of old laundry growing around my suitcase. Nothing to eat anywhere. Not a packet of pretzels from the airplane. I stuck my mouth under the tap in the kitchenette and drank and drank, and splashed water into my eyes. I did not need to see myself now.

The light behind me in the bathroom mirror as I brushed my teeth was the lonesome white light on someone in a hotel room in a foreign country where they have never been. The artifacts of Emma's makeup and curling iron and hairdryer and all around me, strange to me now as historic remains, like cities frozen in time by volcanoes. Or simply because the people all at once stood from their breakfast cereal and games of checkers and walked away. Here was a wet towel in a wad on the floor, a blonde hair in the sink, a pair of panties on the edge of her bed, and Emma's own empty wineglass on the nightstand. I raced from the room, up the path and through the lobby, waving to Manolis through the service window of the bar. Tonight he had a full house and did not see me.

Gerald slapped me on the back at the car, too eager. Neither of us had imagined each other here with Raja, who was standing on the other side. Professor, Gerald said and I said, Hey. I squeezed into the back seat of the little rental, and Raja got in the passenger side in front of me, filling the space with sensory announcement. On the curve out of the driveway were the flags of ten nations, spotlit from below in the brush, lank in the windless night. No United States. The hotel marquee said Hera Village, Hotel, Restaurant, Greek Specialty—Rabbit In Wine Sauce, BBQ Lamb and Chicken. Not a single letter of the Greek alphabet.

Stalkers, Gerald said and tilted the rearview mirror to contain the reflection of two blonde girls I'd seen earlier that day at the pool. You see those two?

Raja said, You're simply off your cake, aren't you Gerald.

I looked out the back window to the girls. They stood by the road with their parents, waiting for a taxi.

Raja said, Gerald's got it in his head that those sweet young girls are out to get him. Probably want to tackle him, pin him down... and tickle him! Raja sprung on him and jabbed his ribs with her fingers. He curled up and giggled.

Stop it! Gerald said. You think I'm being unreasonable, but you've seen it, you know I tell no falsehoods.

Raja said, A clerk following you around HMV for ten minutes hardly constitutes stalking.

I said, Why are people on your trail?

Raja turned to me in the back seat and looked crazy. Ooh, terrific, she said to Gerald. Tell him. I want to hear the words actually come out of your mouth.

It could be worse, he said and started the car. They could throw darts at my picture.

No, go on, Gez, Raja said. Tell Alex what you tell me all the time. No respect for privacy, no sense of decency—just because I'm a big celebrity—just because I can eat fire and dance flamenco—just because I did seven months with the Royal Shakespeare Company and have a certificate from the Society of British Fight Directors.

I have never used that word, he said and held his finger in front of her nose.

Celebrity? It's just a word, she said. I'm merely giving you a hard time. To me Raja said, He's a serious actor, really. And quite brilliant. And slightly handsome. From the left side, at least.

You're on my right side, dear.

Yes, she said with suspicion meant for my fun. Yes, I know.

Gerald did not attack traffic in the fashion of the Greek taxi drivers, and the rental could not have passed a Mercedes if he tried. The taxis advanced rapidly from behind and waited on our back bumper for Gerald to pull over, flashing their lights on us, and when he would not, the taxis whipped past anyway. We coasted down the hill, beyond the turnoff for the Poseidon, and it gave a flash of seafoam green neon between two buildings as we passed.

Bounding down the narrow road, we came along the sea and by fine hotels with fat palm trees and the tourists walking in the night in their holiday clothes, pink legs with no socks in our headlights. Cars came out from the town to us and lit the lines of couples from behind. Twos and twos and twos in silhouette. Here we passed restaurants with thatched roofs and stenciled signs. Enjoy Our Tasteful Dishes, said one. By souvenir shops that said Cava and spilled right out into the road with their postcards, sandals, beachmats, sunglasses, racks of CDs and pornography and children's books and bizarre crossword puzzles in Greek. Further on we passed a motorcycle rental shop I'd gone by the other day, and next to it, a parking lot jammed with retired tour vans and buses, saltwater streaked on the windows, the lettering on the sides gone white with lime as though the destinations they advertised had faded too. The cities had been the names of places I'd never been.

The road along Mirabello Bay always appears wet, and I saw now, especially so at night, as though slashed with puddles. It takes you to the hub of Aghios Nikolaos, where a bridge crosses a narrow rill that joins the bay to a deep, deep lake at the base of a steep hill. At night the buildings on the hill are all splendid and quiet

above the blasting klaxon bursts of the motorcycles, the bouzouki music from the cafés, and the voices held around the lake by the bowled walls of the hill like a theater. On the south hill's crest, the hospital cross glows green over everything. The lake bridge is where you find the taxi queue, a booth with a dim yellow lighted sign and kitchen chairs out front. If you want to find a taxi, you do not wait on a street corner for one to pass. You go to the queue. The drivers are all smoking and huddled in deep, deep conspiracy around a game of backgammon, and if you tell a driver on any part of the island of Crete you want to go to Aghios Nikolaos, they do not ask for an address. This is where they take you. We followed this road now into the main part of town, and Raja told Gerald to park somewhere, wherever. We weren't likely to get any closer and find parking on a Saturday night.

Is that what day it is? Gerald said.

He pulled into a space in front of a newsagent. We got out and walked, me behind Gerald and Raja and he with his hand on the small of her back, his thumb inside the back of her dress. We moved into a crowd and along the black water, by a hotel Gerald said was the most expensive on the island, then past the vacant concrete shell next door to it, behind scraps of a chain-link fence and rusted red barrels in high, old weeds. Then an English fish shop, called Mr. Chippy.

I said, You'd never know we weren't in Piccadilly Circus.

We passed a health store called Taste Of Life. Behind the rows of olive oil and jars of honey a fat woman smoked a cigarette, and we all lit cigarettes to smoke as we walked. In the dark harbor water were a few small jetboats and a cruiseship like a block of glacial ice, and people sat under every umbrella and in every seat of every

café along the water. A boat that looked hijacked from Disneyland was anchored close to the lake bridge, a pirate ship in flowery color with a whorish mermaid on the prow, now a bar and dance club called the Armida. We passed the blue sandwich board with the Armida's drink specials written out in pink chalk, every word in English. Gerald said we should have a drink before dinner, and before Raja could argue, he had us in the door of a place called Sorrento.

The room was packed and loud, but two men saw Raja and got down from their high table and let her in. That we were with her did not matter. She and I took barstools and Gerald went for drinks. It was a sports pub, with soccer matches on televisions at either end, a string of English football team flags festooned over the bar, a rack of Irish whiskey, Guinness and Newcastle insignias glowing on the flanks of the bar's big mirror. People stood three deep and a short woman with curly hair pointed out into the crowd and nodded and cracked beers and hammered two shakers full of ice and liquor above her head. The other bartender, a young man with spiked hair, stared into the blue light of his cell phone. A pop song came through the noise.

Raja said something and pointed at the ceiling, but all I could see was her mouth moving. We were right across from each other, and we leaned in over the dirty table. This music, she said. I think this is Bryan Adams.

It's an epidemic, I said. I was yelling, and she nodded, but there was no way to know if she could hear what I said.

Raja pushed the empty glasses to the table's edge, stacking them in the largest one, and lit a cigarette by putting one in her mouth and poking it into the candle on the table. I smoked, too, and we smiled instead of talking. Gerald had worked closer to

the bar. Faces were blue and pink in the light of the televisions, arms raised and swinging, jets of cigarette smoke in the air.

How's your holiday? I yelled, stupidly, across the table.

It's alright, Raja yelled back. Just fine, really. Why do you ask?

I said, It was just something to say.

It's hard to talk in here, she said. Too nosy.

I didn't mean to be nosy, I said.

Noisy, Raja said. Noisy.

Sure.

Gerald emerged with three gin and tonics wedged in his fingertips. Find you in a bit, he said kissed Raja's neck. Gerald returned to the bar and the bartender with the spiked hair came out and took Gerald past us and down the hall.

Let's go outside, I said.

Terrific idea, Raja said and brought Gerald's drink, too.

Once out of the bar we felt the sea air and the sound was no sound. Then our ears filled again with the hissing refrigerators, the buzzing televisions, the drumbeat of idling engines, a thousand songs in a thousand bars. The whistling noses of sleeping old men in their apartments. We stood on the bar's steps until we saw people walking across the street with their beers, and we followed them to the water. Now I had my thumb in the back of Raja's dress and my fingers on the heat of the pantherous muscles under her skin, and we leaned on the rail and drank.

You can't get away from it, Raja said and nodded to the bar and the music, clear to us now above the voices inside. She said, Last night after you left that bartender—the one with the boggly eyes—regaled us with the story of how he'd been living in London a few years ago and actually got to see Bryan Adams in concert. In Finsbury Park, in the rain.

Raja laughed and drank. She said, You should have seen him tell it. I thought his eyes were going to pop out. He said it was the first time he'd ever seen people just passing around spliffs—he said, His music, it is so powerful, Raja said and adopted Manolis's accent but had to stop to laugh. Then she said in the same voice, I leave and I am feeling Bryan Adams deep in my spine.

I laughed and said to her, Thank you for asking me to come out with you tonight.

It's nothing at all, she said and we clinked glasses.

I took a long drink, drained it almost all the way down, and said, If I did something that might have made things awkward now—with you and me and Gerald—

You didn't, Raja said. We are out to have a good time tonight, and we already formed a secret alliance.

Where do you suppose he went? I said.

Probably to get something to put up his nose, I would wager, Raja said and she turned her back to the rail and my hand slipped away from her and fell to my side.

Oh. Of course.

It's not such a big deal, Raja said and was looking for Gerald through the heads in the bar across the street. Just that it's every bloody time we go out. You'd think we could just spend one quiet night getting a bit squiffy at the pub without ending up at some strange flat at seven the next morning listening to some arsehole play his guitar while everyone's licking the mirrors. Raja turned to me and gave an apologetic grin, girlish, cuter than she was exotic, and the urge was to take her home and be everything to her for the next hundred years. Build her a house. She said, Listen to me going on when I promised to keep you distracted.

Can I have Gerald's drink? I said. I'll go get us some more.

She handed me the other gin and tonic and I set the first tumbler on the ground. Raja said, Now I can have a cigarette.

I put one in my mouth and lit it and handed it to her. A silly thing, something I did all the time. I said, I didn't want you to get the wrong idea from last night.

What did I say? she said. Nothing to worry about.

You are very striking, I said.

Why thank you, she said.

I said, I know you have a boyfriend.

I do have a boyfriend, she said. I do.

I said, You're on to me.

I'm on the trail, maybe. It doesn't mean I've caught you yet.

If he comes back right now, what do we say?

You want to say something to me before he comes back?

You, Raja, are crafty, I said.

No tricks, she said. I wouldn't try to trick you into saying something you didn't mean to say, even if you have maybe, just maybe, had a little too much to drink.

I said, Then I promise not to tell you how easy it would be for us to jump into one of those boats and disappear together forever. To say so would cross a line.

Thank you Alex, Raja said and laughed. I appreciate your good manners, Raja said. She put her drinking arm around my waist and said, But perhaps you'd go check on Gerald. I seem to recall some nasty rumor involving a meal.

I went back across the street and into the bar. I did not see Gerald, but found the reflection of the bartender with the spiked hair in the bar mirror. I made my way through the people, explaining myself. I just need to ask something, sorry, I said. I won't be long.

The bartender looked from his phone to me when I got an angle in to the bar.

You were with a friend of mine, I said. Gerald?

Venko, he said.

No, my friend's Gerald, I said and almost said that I did not really know him, that I could not call him my friend. Almost said something about not every really knowing who your friends are. Instead, I said, Give me a beer.

Venko handed me a list.

Bud? I said surprised. You really have Budweiser?

Venko did not answer. He set one on the bar, and I drank, and it most definitely was Budweiser, but the label just said Bud. I started to read it. This is the famous Bud beer... And then I didn't need to read anymore. I drank. The feeling was like throwing a bucket of water back down the well. There is a point when you have been drunk so many days in a row that it somehow seems insurmountable to reach it again. It is best to go home and watch an old movie like *The Sting* or *The Pink Panther* and make dinner, something with real mashed potatoes, and take a hot shower before bed, and as you lie there between the fresh sheets with damp hair and the BBC World Service playing on your clock radio, reading the Science section from the Tuesday New York Times from the week before, you can experience actual and absolute recovery. Sleep will come more easily than you ever thought. But now I was on Crete, in an English tourist pub, drinking Budweiser called Bud, years and miles from real mashed potatoes. In the background, the Scorpions. *Here I am... Rock you like a hurricane...*

What does that even mean? I said to no one particular, and I flipped five hundred drachmas onto the bar.

Your friend goes to outside for your girlfriend, said Venko and his accent was Russian. Leonid. Natalia. I threw back the rest of the beer.

Outside, Gerald wrapped his arms around Raja from behind. He said Manolis had told him about a restaurant called Ela that stayed open very late, on the other side of the marina. I was past the tipping point of food's help, and suddenly knew I should leave Raja to Gerald. But then Raja said she'd just been telling Gerald about what she called my adventure.

The Poseidon? I said.

You must tell it, you tell things in such a brilliant way, she said. All the juicy bits.

And so I went on with them, talking again. I talked and we walked over the bridge and along the water, slipping through the other tourists—families and couples, three middle aged women in caftans, a man with red pants and red sneakers on the arm of a fifteen-year-old girl. Another man with red trousers rolled on his vespa in front of us to a stop at the patio of one of the cafés, unhooked his helmet, and sat down and lit a cigarette without saying a word to the other people at the table. With no reaction from them. We stepped out into the street to avoid the scooter. Raja laughed along with me as I told them of my night. Gerald laughed too. I did not say anything about Natalia in her room. It seemed like something not to say.

We walked past a confectioner's shop that smelled of hot waffles, and waitresses stepped into traffic to cross the road from a café called Asteria to the patio at the water, carrying plates of Greek salad and french fries and trays of tropical drinks, the rims sugared and wedged with fruit chunks and umbrellas and children's straws. From the water, all the city's roads went up the hill, paved with cobbles and crossed over and over with wires of candent white lights hung on wooden frames like fishhooks, and the few cars that did descend the road below the lights moved slowly, through a flock of people as unaware as sheep.

We found our way to the quiet on the far side of the marina, where every other building was dark and where the lit cafes were nearly empty, and all of us were quiet until we saw the restaurant Ela, and Raja said, Food!

A man in a plaid shirt whose sleeves covered his hands came out from the restaurant to tell us we were very, very welcome. Like Asteria and many of the other cafés, there was a patio across the road, and we sat down under an umbrella. I set the menu in my lap. There were no pictures, and everything seemed to be written in another language. A long cat with white paws and white legs walked under the tablecloth and across my feet and fell over, asleep, and it did feel so good to sit again. My skin was warm with alcohol, and everything felt very warm and loose. Words on the menu undulated on the page. I had been wrong about being beyond food. Food! The English translation appeared in front of my eyes, and I wanted to eat Oregano and Tomato Bread, Cretan Hard Cheese, Mushrooms In Cream, Grilled Cheese Saganaki—whatever that was—and I wanted Risotto 4 Cheeses, Calzone Special, Pizza Inferno. But I could not choose only one. Serbian chicken, purred the cat on my feet, whurring with happiness against my ankletops. And right now I could take the cat's advice, because anything would be perfect.

Raja and Gerald had a harder time. They'd not had enough to drink and therefore remained burdened by choice, as for them there was still the great potential for disappointment. I called for a bottle of retsina. Gerald demurred with his fancy movie star wave and lifted a big eyebrow. Self-command meant to distinguish himself from me. I said, Yeah, come on, and then the wine was there and the man in the big plaid shirt poured it into three tumblers. A screwtop glass bottle. Shouldn't it have a cork, to seal it with the pine? Isn't that what gives it the flavor? Raja was trying to imagine that I was not drunk, resolute in the task of choosing from the menu. She pointed out a Lebanese gyro to Gerald, and he said that sounded quite nice, and I felt

at a loss that I was the only one drinking the good, cold wine. When the waiter came to our table, Gerald asked, What precisely is a shawarma? I laughed, and said, What do you think of when I say shawarma? Should I warm ya? Should I warn ya? Raja laughed. So goddamned lovely. Gerald, you're a lucky fuck.

We ordered and the man left and Gerald said, Hard to believe. Your trip to the brothel last night, I mean.

Surreal, I said.

Seriously, mate. Why can't you and the missus get on?

Long story, I said. And anyway, I made a deal.

That's right, Raja said. Sworn to it.

What sort of a deal? Gerald said through a plastic smile and he was not a very good actor at all.

Raja hooked her arm through Gerald's and said, Just that he won't wallow in misery if we'll show him a good time.

So what can we talk about? Gerald said. Say, for instance, what brought you to London in the first place, professor.

Oh, Gerald, we talked all about this last night but you were too bloody pissed, Raja said.

I guess I don't remember, Gerald said and was looking at me.

Gerald leave it alone, Raja said

It's fair, I said. I don't think I was entirely honest last night.

About what? Raja said.

I told you I was in London because of a research grant and I called Emma out of the blue. But there's more to it.

Gerald said, Coming awfully close to breaking your pact with Raja, mate.

You're right, I said. I topped off my glass of retsina and drank.

We smoked and the cats made friends with the other diners, leaping onto surprised laps and stretching their claws. The man in the plaid shirt was clearing a table and an orange tabby jumped into the breadbasket, and he gathered the dishes around the cat without trying to shoo it away. Another cat stopped in the middle of the road to preen. There hadn't been a single car since we sat down.

When the food came, I devoured the chicken, its white meat stuffed with ham and goat cheese, the pile of sticky white rice, the french fries, the Greek salad, all of it ordinary and delicious. When the man in the plaid shirt asked how we were enjoying the food, he did not wait for an answer, and said, If you are still alive, then I suppose it is okay. Raja and Gerald laughed and laughed, but my mouth stayed full. They ate as though it was not keeping them alive, stopping to talk, planning a day trip to the beaches of Malia the next day. I lowered my head and finished the job. I sat back and breathed. Raja was gone.

I looked across the street, into the bright lit corridor of a restaurant that was Ela, and Gerald sat staring at me.

Had enough yet? he said.

I hadn't eaten all day, I said.

You have serious bullocks, mate, he said.

I'm sorry? I said.

My fiancée isn't here to make new friends, certainly not with lonely American men, he said and forked a bite on his plate and put it in his mouth and chewed.

I understand that, I said.

Gerald swallowed and folded his napkin, preparing his speech. Then he said, You'll realize I'm quite at a loss as to what you think you might be doing here. I see that your holiday hasn't turned out as you planned, but, here too, I fail to see how that is any of my fault. Since you are so comfortable making your own business ours, let me tell you about mine. Raja and I are here to make some rather important decisions, the content of which I can only hope will remain private. I'm not telling you because you deserve to know. I don't owe you anything.

I said nothing.

Gerald said, I'll spell it out for you. Get up from the fucking table, and leave my fiancée alone.

I wiped my mouth and stood. You know, I said and was announcing it for show. I said, I don't really feel like walking all the way back to the car. I think I might find a taxi. Let me leave some cash.

I wouldn't hear of it, Gerald said.

Raja was back at the table. You're leaving? she said.

You'll pardon me, won't you? I said. I'm sure Emma is expecting me. You were very kind to invite me. Nice talking with you, I said to Gerald.

He nodded and I turned and walked away. Along the harbor road were cafés that I had not seen before, and I could feel myself walking again. The food anchored in my belly, and everything that had floated around me now dropped noisily back to earth. I passed the same people drinking the same drinks at every café, trying so hard to be happy, and there were more cars now, going faster, honking and blasting exhaust, and where did any of these people think they were going? Near the water, a weathered sign said Spinalonga Express Buzz Travel, and the dark boat behind the sign looked like it was made of rotten bones in the black pool of the marina. Here was every small detail of the city I'd seen from across the water, every inch of it sinking into ugliness around me. I stopped to light a cigarette near Asteria, and Raja called out, Alex stop, and she caught me, almost running, her tall shoes clapping the street.

He's really not like that, she said and touched my arm and breathed hard.

I was being repulsive, I said.

Raja shook her head in her way, the hair swinging into her eyes. Now it seemed too girlish. She smoothed it away and said, He's just had a bit to drink, and—I haven't been entirely honest with you, either. Gerald's asked me to marry him. Two months ago. Right after he got the BBC job.

Congratulations, I said and inhaled on my cigarette.

Raja said, I told him I wasn't sure. It was hardly the answer he was hoping for. Hardly what any man who's gotten himself in the position to ask that question wants

to hear. I told him I'd think about it, and he's brought us here. To sway me, one supposes. It's not fair that he take it out on you.

Alright, I said.

Raja said, I just wanted to—nobody here knows.

Gerald was on the promenade behind the café, coming our way. He was right. When I looked at Raja and tried to see the desire in her deep, dark eyes, I saw that what she wanted was a friend. Good luck with everything, I said. And thank you again.

I left her there by the bridge. The taxi queue was just ahead, but I went past it, back along the road to the Armida, and to Bar Sorrento. Outside was a chalkboard I'd not noticed before when there were more people. On it said, Choose Fun? Choose Good Music? Choose Neil Diamond? Choose Sorrento. The music on the stereo wasn't Neil Diamond, but not any better. Alannah Myles, Black Velvet. One of my least favorite versions of one of my least favorite songs in the whole goddamned world.

I found a stool in front of Venko and he asked if I wanted another Bud and I said yes. And ouzo, I said. No ice, no water.

Venko filled a shot glass and I downed it. I said, This is how we do it in America. In Bulgaria, too, Venko said and poured himself one and we drank together.

And here, on Crete, I said and we drank again. The next song was Welcome To The Jungle.

Ah yes, Venko said. You like the Guns And Roses?

I hate the Guns And Roses, I said. Let's drink more. It's perfect.

I WOKE UP, SMELLED FAKE TAN. Some time had lapsed. I opened my eyes to blackness. My face in Emma's hair. She was in my bed and had me pushed against the stone wall. My wrist was on her hipbone under the sheet and my fingertips on her stomach. It was soft and smooth and flat. Where our flesh had been touching it was hot and our sweat was on each other. I had on boxer shorts. She was naked.

I jerked up and thumped my head against the wall. I swore. She did not move. I climbed over her and my bare feet slapped the tile. My eyes found shapes in the blue dark and I went to the door. I pulled it groaning open and lit a cigarette on the veranda.

The stars shook as I smoked. I blew clouds at them to make them stop. They moved back and forth and left vivid streaked tails. I leaned over the rail to vomit but nothing would not come out. A lone unripe fig hung before me and it held my stare. Then the leaves around it stopped shaking. Then the tree. Then the bungalow below ours on the mountainside, and the stairs to it, and the path.

The door groaned again. I turned to see her, the sheet tucked under her arms, and she held it at the chest and she held the back of the sheet like a wedding train. She looked like Greek mythology. She sat down next to me and her hands went carefully to my face, and the sheet fell to her lap.

Do you have dodgy guts? she said and put out my cigarette on the rail and pressed her mouth to mine. Her lips tasted of wine, and her skin was boozy sweet.

I'm sorry, Emma, I said and kissed back.

You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about, she said. Oh, dear. Alex come here, she said and held on to me.

I'm so so sorry, I said and felt so fucked up stupid, drunk and choked up and hiccuping.

Don't, Emma said. Don't do that. Do you need to be sick?

Emma, do you ever have those moments, I said, you know, when you can make sense out of everything?

Shhh, she said. Shhh.

I just feel like time's run out. On everything.

Don't worry, Alex.

I breathed hard and pulled away from her, and said, I have to be honest with you about why I came to England. I need to tell you. You need to know.

Come back to bed. Tell me tomorrow when you're better.

I'm drunk, I said.

So am I.

Everyone thinks I'm in London, I said. No one knows I'm here on Crete.

I do. You can telephone someone tomorrow. Your sister. Your friend Matt. Tell him you're here with me. Come back to bed.

I followed and got in the bed with her. She flapped her mythical wedding gown over us. My hand went to her stomach again and she moved it to cup her warm breast.

You must have had quite the night, she said.

I nodded, my hair whooshing on the pillow, and she felt that I'd said yes.

Yours? I said into her shoulder.

Brilliant, she said and she was a thousand miles away from me. Then she said, You remember that New Year's eve when I made the linguine with scallops?

You were sure the scallops had gone bad, I said.

You threw up, didn't you, she said.

Twenty-seven times, I whispered. But you always think the shellfish is off.

You say, she said. Emma shifted her body into mine, her bottom pressed into me.

I counted, I said.

I have no idea how. You didn't count the glasses of champagne you drank after the scallops.

You were really nice to me then, I said.

I'm not nice to you anymore, am I? she said and held my hand on her breast, and I took her nipple in my fingertips and she pulled my hand away and held it to her stomach, just at the edge of her pubic hair .

It's been a long time, I said. I didn't expect anything like that. That's not why I'm here.

Quiet now. I could at least be nicer to you. I could try.

I... I said and my mouth stayed open but nothing else came out. It was racing away from me and I had caught it.

What? Emma said.

I said, I'm just going to get myself into trouble.

What is it? she said.

No, really.

Alex, Emma said. The moon was on us but far gone from sight, just rays of light reflected, somehow finding us together in my bed in the Hera Village Hotel between Elounda and Aghios Nikolaos, on Crete, for each of us so very far from home. Emma said, What is it you want to say?

It sounds so stupid, I said. Everything I've said all day is stupid.

Go on, she said softly.

I missed you. That's what I wanted to say.

Do you still love me? she said.

I didn't want you to know.

No. I wish you hadn't told me. I'm sure it's just the alcohol talking. I never know if I should believe what you tell me, Emma said.

But you asked, I said and moved my hand down between her legs.

It just makes things harder, Emma said.

Just like old times, I said. She laughed a small laugh. Also like old times, we fell asleep before our bodies could do anything else.

ELOUNDA LAGOON

LATE THE NEXT MORNING I went up the road from Hera Village to the bus stop and sat on a low brick wall to wait. Baked in the wind. The sea pierced my eyes, the sheet of chopped waves like shattering glass. The sky was raw and fat with blue, and the hills across Mirabello Bay roiled away behind a cloud of blue like a sandstorm.

The sun coated the road before me, and the hill above. Where the island was carved away for the road, white roots hung through beds of gray earth and creamy chalk and red clay with stripes of ash in between. Further, toward the summit, the hill was a field of gray shrubs and brittle yellow grass, and it dried my eyes to look there, like the blast of a furnace. Manolis, the liar, had told me when I asked for a taxi into Aghios Nikolaos that the bus to Elounda would be by in five minutes. Wait for the green one, he said. Go into Elounda, save your money for better things, he said, a judgment upon me.

Emma had not been in my bed when I woke. No handbag or sunglasses on the table. When I went to shower I passed through her room. The bed was empty, her artifacts unstirred from the night before. And I did not find her at the restaurant, the pool, the lobby, the bar. I got ready without her. I would go to Elounda on my own and be happy. If only the bus would get here.

Now I waited. When a large vehicle down the mountain began its climb, I'd hear it before I would see it, and I would stand. When it was not a green bus, I'd sit

and wait again as it wheezed all the way up and bellowed past. It was never a green bus. Other buses had gone by, but none were green, and none stopped when I stood below the sign. From the other way had come two buses, headed to Aghios Nikolaos. They did not even slow as they coasted past me and my hopeless sign. Bus Stop. In English first, then the Greek below.

Another road sign in the direction of Elounda said Cava, 100 Meters. A liquor store, a thought which made my insides hiss. But those were the same markets that also sold everything else. There would be a bottle of water and cheap sunglasses. The crest of the road hid the market, though, or hid where the market was supposed to be, and I no longer trusted the Greeks and their signs. The Cava might be a mile away. And there was no way to know if the shopkeeper did not open the doors until noon, or only once a week, or if the market had been open in ten years.

I could go back to the hotel and get what I needed at the kiosk by the pool. But then Emma would be back from wherever she had gone, long enough apart to restore us to our proper separation. If she did not see me, we would each be left in our last moment, in the night before when more seemed possible. I could stay away from her all day. Now, the sun in my eyes like a blade, my sour, empty stomach—these were nothing compared to the need to get to Elounda. And, too, more practically, the chance of the bus arriving grew more inevitable with each passing minute. If I left now, a train of green buses would surely appear. I sat, I would wait.

I heard something impending, and I stood to see a long black sedan, not a vehicle of Crete, riding hard up the curves. The limousine sputtered exhaust as it climbed, rocking by the white shrines at the edge of the road, tires ripping through the

crumbling lip. The driver was giving it everything, and the engine screamed like a kettle. It was a hearse, with a fishbowl of windows at the rear, unlike the funeral carriages in America, where the windows are small, satin-gilded portholes from which you should respectfully avert your gaze. And here, unheard of, a sunroof. A glass pod packed with wildflowers, with an advertisement stenciled white on the bubbled sides. As the hearse neared the hotel, I could see the casket through the roof, a wooden box draped with a red laurel. There was no procession. For a moment, no other cars on the hill. I stayed on my feet as the hearse passed. The driver drummed the steering wheel like a bongo. The underside of the hearse cracked against the pavement, out came a mournless blast of smoke, and the long black car zoomed over the hill.

There you are, said Emma from behind me. Her arms were crossed over her chest and her shoulders were bare, and her appearance pushed last night away into the thousand nights of our past that we would never talk about again. A gust whipped through her lavender cotton dress and spun her loose hair, but her smells flew right past me, and all that was in my nose was the smell of heat on everything. She said, Been looking everywhere for you.

Yes, I'm here.

Are you taking the bus somewhere?

I was going into Elounda for breakfast, I said.

I hired a car, she said and looked back to the hotel, smoothing the hair from her eyes, across her forehead, and behind her ears, where there were no earrings and never had been. She said, Are you pissed off with me about something?

Everything's fine, I said.

Oh dear goodness, you are, she said.

I didn't know where you were this morning, I said.

Just around the hotel. Had a walk down to the beach.

I said, The beach.

Yeah, there's a road that goes down the back of the hotel to a little beach, Emma said. If you can call it that. That boggly-eyed bartender told me about it, said it was the hotel's private beach, and I got excited, but it's just a bit where they've mowed down the weeds between a couple of bloody boulders. It was quite scary actually. There's an old van down there, she said and then whispered, I think someone lives in it.

Oh, I said.

Is that what you're upset with me about? she said. That you couldn't find me.

I think I'm still a little drunk, I said.

I know I am, she laughed. That's why you have to drive.

Me?

She said, The agency dropped it off this morning. I wanted to take a drive. Maybe have lunch in Plaka, find a proper beach. I wish I could remember all the places we used to go. Ooh. You should go get your swimming costume.

Sure, I said.

It's that little jeep just right there, she said. It was a silver, open-topped Suzuki, what the Greeks called a jeep, parked outside the front lobby under the international flags. I'd walked right past it.

Is it a stick-shift? I said. Is that why you need me to drive?

That's not all, Alex, she said. You remember when you used to give me driving lessons? In that car park, in the middle of the night?

Of course I remembered but did not say so. It was a long time ago, I said. You've been driving for years.

Go on, Emma said. Go change. I've got my bikini on under my clothes already. Can I have a cigarette?

You don't smoke, I said.

Do when I'm drinking, she said. I fancy one right now.

I gave her one.

You're not going to light it for me, she said. It's windy.

Like I used to, you mean? I said.

She shrugged. I took the cigarette and stuck it in my lips and cupped my hand around my lighter and turned into the wind and got a flame that stayed and lit it. She giggled. I took a drag to get it going and gave it back to her. I told her I'd go put on some shorts, and we walked back down to the hotel. She threw an elbow on the jeep's hood, tossed her hair, and smoked, acting out some other scene of ours that I did not recognize. She said, Hurry. I'm absolutely famished.

Behind the front desk was a heavy man with electric white hair and thick glasses that magnified his eyes to fill the black frames. The owner of the hotel, Manolis's father. Something I had heard in the hotel bar. Did Manolis own the hotel?

Yai sou, yai sou, said the man.

I waved and went out the doors, where a French child of eight or nine goaded the parrot in its cage, head cocked to mimic the angle of the bird's neck. The boy prodded the bird to speak with sing-song parrot chatter, the same shrill call over and over in French. Above the music and voices and splashing at the swimming pool and the breeze whistling across every surface of the hotel, I could hear the boy almost all the way back to my room.

I changed into a pair of swimming trunks and boat shoes I'd bought in central London when Emma had asked me to come to Greece with her, as ordinary as I could be, filled with banal thoughts. It seemed very ordinary now to be here doing what Emma said she wanted to do. For years I had not allowed myself to wonder what it would be like when I saw her again. Now without asking, I knew. I would light her cigarettes in the way I used to. Let her misremember the desperation of the long-lost late nights in country club parking lots. Listen as she frosted it all with fondness. I would wear these damn bright green trunks and have a bite to eat and share an odorless afternoon in a quaint little fishing village. But I was not ready to give us over to the past, pretend our story did not exist. Everything else she asked me to do, I would do. But not that. I didn't bother with the mirror before I went back out. There wasn't anything else I needed to know about myself.

I stared down the French boy as I passed, searing holes through him. His torture of the bird was single-minded. And I shot a glance at the bird for not lashing out, for not doing what the moment required, jamming its black beak into the French boy's eye. Why was it not moved to say something, shriek out to the boy that he was a fool to say the same thing over and over again and expect a different result? But maybe that was all the boy was hoping for. The parrot sat on its perch under the eaves, blasé. No French came to mind to tell the boy myself. I did not know any. I was still looking over my shoulder when I brushed against cool skin, bare belly skin, and there before me was a girl with sexy dark hair, a black bikini top and sarong.

So sorry, Raja said. Oh, hello, my darling, she said as she saw that it was me.

Morning, I said, and knew the captain's stomach when he's at the wheel as his ship rockets to the bottom of the sea.

On your way out? she said and lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the sun that crashed into the room behind me. Her nose was pink with sun. If she were your girlfriend, it would be the kind of nose you kissed before and after you kissed any other part of her. She was twelve inches away—we had not moved much apart—but seemed as far away as an actor on television.

Emma and I are going into Elounda, I said and stood there, my legs sticking out of the green trunks.

My dashing, romantic American friend, Raja said. I'm glad for you. I do want to say again how sorry I am for Gerald's behavior last night. He kept me up until nearly dawn in a jealous snit.

You of all people have nothing to be sorry about, I said and it was hard to hide the brief but medicating happiness that came with the thought of Gerald Coulthard's own ship brought down, in some way however small, in drama caused by me.

At any rate, Raja said. Good for you. Perhaps we'll see each other again, she said. She leaned in and said in a hush, I'm planning the murder of a rather vile French schoolboy and will need an accomplice to dispose of the evidence.

If I don't get to him first, I said.

She brushed my arm at the elbow, half a touch, as though the moment had already passed as it occurred, memory in place of the present, and she offered a smile. She walked away into the sunshine. The light was the light on a pretty girl as she leaves you.

Emma was in the passenger chair of the jeep watching traffic, twiddling her hair. I climbed in the driver's side and felt the wind rush into my shorts. My thighs stuck to the hot seat. The floorboards smelled of rain. Emma dangled the keys for me, and I let them fall into my hand, and I sat there, the task of driving a car startling and real.

Alex, she said.

I did not turn to her. I said, I don't think it's fair of you to just decide to be nice to me.

What did you say?

You heard me, I said.

I heard you say something, but it makes absolutely no sense.

You know what I mean, I said.

She said, If it's what I think you mean, then I do hope I am incorrect.

You suddenly want to take me to lunch and out for the day?

Emma laughed. You'd rather I had a go at you? So you'd have something to complain about to all your new friends at the hotel?

I just never expected this from you, I said, charging forward, ignoring the sting of truth in her jab.

Expected what? That I might be able to behave like a decent, caring human being? I bet that would come as a surprise to you.

No, not that. That you'd pity me.

God, Alex. Are you going to have a bloody downward spiral?

I'm perfectly fine, I said and looked at her. You're missing what I'm saying. I'm not some wounded animal, Emma.

We're going to argue about this all day, aren't we, Emma said and her shoulders slumped.

Well, what then? I said.

Emma said, Is it so hard to conceive that I just might have wanted to have a nice day out? And that I might want to include you? she said.

That last time you said something like that, we ended up here on Crete, I said.

Why do you always say things like that? Emma said. You're always trying to make me feel like complete shit for what I've supposedly done to you.

Maybe if you considered—

No, you consider, Alex. You act this way and it hardly makes me think fondly of you. It definitely makes it difficult to think of why I ever fancied you, much less—well whatever. Much less nothing.

You're right, I said.

No, Emma said and breathed hard and looked up the hill at the scrabbly brush and wiry little trees in the distance. No, you're right. I am a horrible person. But you called me, remember? You came to London. No one, especially me, twisted your arm to be here. Yes I asked you to come, but you could have said no. You knew that I wanted to see some old friends, you know, sort of just be on holiday and not think about anything. I thought you and I might have a laugh.

You're right, I said again.

And right now, you are correct, I cannot operate a manual transmission, and I need your help, she said.

Okay, I said and that was that.

I turned the key. Checked the steadiness of my hand, the hairs on my arm gone blonde with sun. They ached in each place where each hair was rooted, snagged in the hot hooks of the wind, all little flags on an arm with the shakes. Emma looked at my hand and then not at my face or at my eyes but right inside them, past the swollen, hungover lids, and through the fortress of hangover itself, deep down, into the truths I hid from everyone, including myself, and I was indeed just a goddamned wounded animal that she'd lavished with not love but pity, and I tried to push her out

but she would not go, and I tried to ride the connection to her own eyes and into her, but when she felt me regarding her eyes as windows and her soul as a room, she simply dropped the shades of her eyelids and turned away. We pulled out on the road. West.

On these curves there were no shrines, though the drop was grander, the face of the cliff more sheer. We rode the lip. There was no guard rail. I drove slow. Cars and vespas lashed around us. The jeep had no shocks and leered to the right, to the lip, and when the wind shot from the wall of rock below us, or from behind, or from around the next blind corner, it seemed to boost us and the jeep from the road, enough to untether your stomach and let it fly until the jeep eased back into the road's long grooves. Emma clutched her skirt down to the seat with stiff arms, sick with terror, but did not say a thing. What a peach. We didn't try to speak over the engine or the noise of the air as we cut through it.

We passed the Cava, farther than the hundred meter lie, and the road turned inward. We drove through a pass between the hill and a mast of rock pinned full of television antennae, and by a tourist resort at the summit like no other in the towns. The buildings were the same boxes as everywhere else, but painted valentine pink, periwinkle, lavender, lemon and orange cream, set like bad teeth in the stuttered incline under the rock tower. We passed another jeep stopped there. A group of men and women posed in front of the pastel blocks and a woman on the other side of the road took their photograph. Emma never glanced. A few slow clouds moved beyond the resort, and the jeep changed pitch as we headed down the slope to the sea and Elounda spread out before us.

Below was a lagoon, and white hotels around it with peacock blue pools and green groves, the hills spotted with emery stone and forests of brush. The water looked thin as gloss, as though you could walk across the lagoon to the peninsula a half mile away, a spine of hills that closed the town in like a horseshoe. There were only buildings on the near shore. On the peninsula a field of futuristic windmills turned lazily in the sun. We drove down, out of the wind and noise, and slowed. My arms had been lashed to the wheel, hard as ropes. I let them slack and the quiet moved through me. Our view turned back inland, opening into the town, and we drove past a gas station with a white silo rusted orange at the bolts and seams.

That's the only petrol station, Emma said. We'll have to stop there on the way back.

She was lovely as we descended to sea level and into Elounda, like someone singing, but only very deep down in her body, as much a part of this place for me as the lagoon and the ruins and the hills and the sky. The music came not from her mouth but from her eyes, where I still could not go, and it was the way she tried not to stare that told me she was seeing everything, saving it forever. She tucked some hair behind her ear, and it flew away, black gulls dashing behind her in a dotted line on the horizon and over the windmills on the hills. I had seen photos of her from when she lived on Crete. She had always been pretty, but had not yet grown into herself. I had only known her as a woman, a wife and mother. On Crete she had been a girl in a blue and white sailor shirt, flat-chested, sunning herself on the roof of The Dutch Bar, caught in the act of adjusting her bikini bottom on boyish hips. Caught in a laugh that showed a tongue yellow from drinking too much ouzo the night before.

When she lived on Crete, her hair was in what she called her Susie Quattro phase. I never understood, even though I had once gone to the record store just to see the album covers, Susie Quattro turning out to be just as alien as anything in my imagination. And Emma later complained, when we were together, that her hair looked triangular, and I never knew what that meant either. But if she said that, or said she felt like she was having a Susie Quattro day, I knew enough to tell her, No, don't be silly, I love your hair. And it was easy, I meant it. And she would say something about how her husband always noticed women with straight, dark hair. The Asian fashion models. How he had said he liked her hair when they were dating, but once married wanted her to somehow make it not so wild. And I knew enough to say nothing about her husband. The same way that I knew to tell her how she had only become more beautiful since she had lived on Crete. That she had been a pretty girl, but no pretty girl could approach the kind of woman she was now.

I had not seen her look like that girl of seven or eight years earlier until now, and then only for an instant. But it was too hard to see her as something else, and my eyes moved to the same places on her, in the way we are all fools to believe in our souls' free will, and she was the Emma I knew, had never been anything other.

The trench of road dropped us into the town. We came upon a line of traffic behind a slow green bus, as wide as the funneling road. At last, here was the bus into Elounda. Quiet now in the open air of the jeep, an English pop song plunked along on the radio. Kylie Minogue. We rolled slowly past the open markets, an apothecary, the vacant storefronts. Here every taverna sat within a garden or small orchard, and on the road were full-color placards advertising English breakfast served there—eggs, bacon,

sausage, beans, fried tomatoes, and toast. We passed a jewelry store called Ble, expensive and spare with a blonde wood facade, next door to a produce market with pillars draped in inflated pool toys for children—Spiderman, five-foot-long alligators, the classic bright-blue-and-yellow-and-red-and-white beach ball. We stopped when the bus pulled over, no more than a gesture on the narrow road, and the air brakes hissed, a taxi squeezing through from the other way. An English family walking in the road stepped up onto the skinny walk for the taxi to pass and sidled along the wall, hands flat against a mosaic of a mermaid holding a martini glass, coral blue starfish clamped to her breasts. The mother and father and children stopped suddenly, like escapees on a prison wall.

Something came to me about a Turkish prison, something Emma had said to me. Something to do with Maarten and Robbie, the men who'd owned The Dutch Bar, where she had been a cocktail waitress.

Where's The Dutch Bar, I said.

We just passed it, she said. I went there last night, and it's not the same. Called Katafigio Club or something or other. You needn't be jealous. Maarten and Robbie are long gone.

I wasn't thinking of Maarten, I said.

I know how your mind works, Emma said and laughed and we started moving again. Is this your first time in Elounda? I hadn't realized, she said.

But of course she had known. I tried again to get into her eyes, and again she looked away. She pointed to corridors that led into the hills, places she used to go.

There was a new hotel with an oppressive, vaulted iron gate in place of a dirt lot where she had once seen two women nearly claw each other to the death. Next door was an abandoned concrete house, rebar emerging from the broken foundation like fossils rising again from the earth. Emma said every shop or restaurant had an unfinished top floor because of a tax loophole for works under construction.

Right out there is Olous, she said and pointed down a stairway to the water.

I craned my neck around her, slowing the jeep, and the line of sight to the sea closed behind us.

Emma nodded as though I had asked a question. She said, The sunken city. You can go out there and see right down into the ruins on a clear day.

That sounds great, I said.

Emma looked apologetic. I've never actually seen anything, she said. But I've only ever tried to have a look when I was about off my head.

Maybe we could try, I said.

Maybe, she said and looked back to the road. We were never going to try. The city of Olous would stay lost to us, with everything else that we would never do. Entire cities could forever stay under the sea.

We continued into town, past ouzeris, tavernas, creperies, shoe stores, newsagents with postcard spinners on every stoop. White tourist flesh everywhere. The town of Elounda looked like a minor version of Aghios Nikolaos, sleepier, and the cars and the people moved as though they were on an island vacation instead of the clubbers storming the port. The green bus turned off ahead of us, at the nearly empty

main square, and I asked if I should follow. Emma said to keep on the road I was on. We drove between Evangelia's Taverna and its patio across the road, a space which Emma had once crossed a hundred times a day.

Hey! I said, Evangelia's!

Emma laughed. You seem quite excited, she said.

Emma had worked at Evangelia's, too. There was a photo of it in the bathroom of her flat in London, of the old woman Evangelia herself at one of the bistro tables, disapproving through enormous bifocals at the beautiful day before her, a cannonball of a woman in a pink muumuu. From the only seat in the bathroom, you met eyes with Evangelia in the photo, you could not look away, could not help but feel her judgment, preserved and alive as the eyes in paintings by the Dutch masters.

It's just something I recognize, I said. It's strange.

From the bathroom? Emma said. Isn't it awful, with her staring at you— lovely, moustachio'd Evange and her massage-as-you-walk sandals, just itching to go milk her chickens.

I think I heard you say something, but I must be incorrect, I said.

Emma said, It's what she used to say.

Did you go in there?

She remembered me, Emma said and was as content as I had ever seen her.

Where should I park? I said.

Keep going, Emma said. Plaka's a few more miles. I know a place with really nice squid.

You can think about squid right now? I said.

Emma laughed, said, I shall fill you in on Greek refrigeration, and you'll understand nothing is safe. I used to live right there, Emma said and pointed to another hollowed-out structure, the road widening under a belfry and a church capped with a pumpkin-colored dome and white cross. She said, You end up really hating yourself when it's a bloody church bell waking you up from a hangover.

There were people waiting in silence on the stacked stone steps below the tower, gathered in the sliver of shade. I said, I'm surprised you picked right here to live.

I'm not a complete heathen, you know, she said. Even if that is as close as I've come to the wrath of God, she said and laughed and stopped suddenly and looked afraid of me for what she had said and I shook my head to say it was okay, I was a heathen, too, and then we were past the church and into the residences of the town, more white blocks in rows.

The road curved along and took us out of Elounda, under the high sun and the old Greek buildings, a long and broken line that rose into the distance from the hills around the lagoon to the soft-focus mountains that met the sky, and we passed a sharp blue arrow-shaped sign that said Mavrikiano, pointing back up the steep-set blocks on the hill. There are the raki bars, Emma said and pointed up the wedge of road. Far away up the hill a string of ordinary Greek homes was grouped like a single turret, and

in the dry, severe slopes of yard below them were bicycles with spokes grown through with long grass, stiff blades of laundry on lines, piles of white pots and urns. Like Evangelia's, and like The Dutch Bar, Emma had told me about the raki bars, but about them there were no stories that I knew. On the hill behind me, there was no sign of raki, no sign of any life.

Before you go, Emma said, you must have raki at least once.

I had some the other night, I said.

Oh, you have?

In a bar on the way to Ag Nik, I said.

Emma shook her head. You must go to a proper raki bar to get the real thing, she said and this was the only thing she had told me about the raki bars before, it came to me now. She said, You can get crap raki at any alcohol shop, and I nodded. In Elounda, everything Emma said was was true.

We went along the coast road to Plaka, moving onto rougher road that buzzed under the jeep, and here the buildings were smaller, there were no souvenirs on the stoops, no neon behind each window's warbled glass. We eased down the coastline and a hump of an island at the mouth of the lagoon rose toward us, as though coming up from the deeps, ringed with stone walls and an overwhelming tower at the south end. A small tour boat moved slowly toward the island, alongside us but far out in the water, silent, in cinematic distance, the prow rising and falling to knife the white foam.

Suddenly we were in the small fishing village, not only exactly the same as Emma would have seen it ten years ago. That same glass in those windows had been

slowly seeping for a hundred years. The sound of the jeep ripped through the quiet. Along the single road were a few tavernas and a simple rock beach that dropped into the sea. This was what Elounda had been, and even perhaps once Aghios Nikolaos, before it had been overrun with tourists and its harbor lit up like pornography for them. Before it had been seen by people like me.

Emma pointed to a taverna, and I did not see such a thing as a parking lot or even a space, and Emma said to pull onto the sidewalk right in front. I gave a look to ask if she was serious, and she nodded theatrically. We rocked back and forth on the gravel and lurched up onto the walk. I cut the engine, a wave of hot dust blew past, and we looked back to see the stirred up road behind us, clouds of earth in the air smoldering like we'd blazed a trail all the way from the hotel, and Emma laughed. I stepped out onto the ground, the muscles in my legs like plucked guitar strings. I had not been sober enough to drive. Now we were safe. Emma scooted to the driver's seat and reached for my hand and hopped out, and her nostrils flared and she huffed and threw back her eyes, but did not stop me when I held on for one extra second before we went back down the road. We went past a field of feathery wheat like fire in the warm wind, and we stepped through bushes with hexagonal swirls of thorns. She took me into a taverna on the water, its name painted on a wooden board over the arcade, in Greek but no English. Μεδουσα. The Medusa.

We sat in the soft, sunny dining room, every inch of the walls covered in ceramica, and watched through the grooved windows as the boats glided across the lagoon, lurching like nightcrawlers as they moved through the distortion of the glass. There were a few other English diners in the room, but they too spoke as though

visiting a museum, and there was only the soft twinkle of a stereo playing bouzouki music in the kitchen, riding a smell of sauce that had been simmering for days. Emma ordered for us both, speaking good Greek to the black-clad matron. I asked Emma what she'd said and she told me she couldn't remember the subtleties. She knew you could fake your way through anything if you just said Yai sou, yai sou, and had a bottle of wine. And just then a bottle of retsina arrived at the table. The Greek woman pulled open a drawer in the hutch on the wall behind us and dug around for some wrinkled linens, as though she had not been expecting company.

When the woman had gone, I looked at the wine. I said, I don't think I can.

Come now, take your medicine, Emma said and filled the tumblers.

I took a drink. Ah, the pine. I said, To kissing this day goodbye.

Emma laughed. We won't even miss it, she said and we looked out the windows again.

What is that island? I said.

Spinalonga, Emma said. It was a leper colony until just fifty years ago.

It looks ancient, I said.

It was a fortress before all that, Emma said. Like everything else on Crete, I suppose. Someone built it and then someone else took it over, back and forth for a thousand years. Then someone decided that it was better suited to get rid of people than anything else.

You've been out there? I said.

Emma swallowed half of her glass of wine at once and refilled the tumblers. She said, A few times.

There must be a cemetery out there if it was a colony.

For lepers, Emma said. It's really depressing, actually. I don't like to think about it.

I'd like to go out and see it, I said.

I didn't realize this was a working vacation, she said.

I'm just interested, I said. That's why I started with cemeteries in the first place. And then, when my mother died... I said and did not finish the thought.

Emma spread her napkin on her lap, looking for something to talk about. She said, I liked it when you were a student and would tell me all about what you learned in class. It was all different when you started teaching, she said. The wine was working on us but not in the way to make things easier. We sipped, ran our thumbs on our glasses' edges, looked again at the wine. All one drink had done was made us aware of each other, but not forget ourselves.

She looked away, across the room to the other table of English people. The father lifted his head and smiled at us, friendly, and with him were his wife and the two teenage girls who had so affected Gerald. Emma did not react to the smile, turned again to the island and said, Only the tourists ever go out there. If you want to spend a whole day with a bunch of English tourists, go right ahead.

Isn't that what we are? Or at least you? I said. An English tourist?

What do you mean? I used to live here, you know, she said and finally she looked at me and was joking around in a forced way.

That doesn't mean you're not a tourist now, I said.

I think it does, she said and stared at me seriously.

I'm definitely a tourist, I said. Look at my outfit.

Whoever did talk you into those ridiculous swimming trunks?

I have no idea, I said. She must have been really attractive. I tend to make bad decisions around beautiful women.

I bet she wasn't even good looking at all, Emma said and shook her head. Probably just some boring old housewife out for a bit of shopping on Tottenham Court Road.

I said, How did you know where I was shopping?

But Emma would not play it out any further. She looked at her hand wrapped around the winebottle and said softly, I don't have any fucking clue, and it was as sad as anything I'd ever heard her say.

BY THE TIME the Greek woman arrived with four small plates of food, the retsina had us on the upswing, and when she returned with four more plates, Emma gave a comic shrug, unworried that there was enough food for a whole family, and she told me the names of everything so quickly I had to ask again before I caught any of it. There were times with Emma that even to ask her to repeat herself would have ended

the night, but with the food had come cheer, and she liked me. The spanikopita, she explained again through a mouthful, were goat cheese and spinach wrapped in phyllo dough like tightly folded flags, and there were skewers of grilled lamb and pork souvlaki, a pizza called bofor with tomatoes in olive oil, fresh oregano, shrimp, mussels, baby octopus, and squid tentacles and tubes sliced in rings, and a plate with five different kinds of cheese whose names Emma couldn't be bothered with, another of sticky rice, and there were sweet peppers, baked tomatoes, boiled cabbage, a basket with six kinds of bread toasted on an open-fire grill. Emma immediately called for another bottle of wine.

She had a bite of the souvlaki and said the food was nice. Her eyes were wild. She took it in. We ate and Emma told me stories about Elounda, but it was hard to hear her, it had been so long since she and I had sat down together for a meal.

I had never known a woman who ate like Emma did, a woman who ate Thai curry like a child eats an extra slice of birthday cake. Like she was getting away with something. She called the food she enjoyed nice, whether it was fine dining arranged like a miniature Zen garden or if it was something you'd call chow from a diner off the interstate. If she liked it it was nice. Once in Boise I took her to what was supposed to be the best restaurant in town—and was the most expensive—and on the ride home she said she was still hungry, felt embarrassed for saying so, but was not shy about eating her Big Mac in the car in the McDonald's parking lot and asking me if I was finished with mine. The Big Mac was nice, she told me, and her eyes were just as bloodthirsty as they were now. Another time we went to Manley's, that old diner by the highway, the place my father used to go between classes in college—the same

school where, in the coming fall, I would teach a class on the history of the funeral industry in 19th century Idaho, about which Emma would not want to hear. My father told me back then they'd serve you a slice of peach pie right out of the oven so big it covered your whole plate, swore they topped it with an entire quart of vanilla ice cream. Emma looked worried when we sat down in the orange vinyl booth, but then she ate a porterhouse that hung over the sides of her plate, and the mashed potatoes with cream gravy, the corn and french-cut green beans straight out of a can, two rolls, and a salad, and then she asked for a slice of that pie. I could barely finish my own pile of fried chicken I was so crazy for her.

And Emma could cook. She made English Sunday roast dinner with yorkshires, or prawn curry with what she called sweaty cucumber salad. The sweatier the better, she always said. She'd count the cardamom pods when she put them in the sauce and again when she'd fish them out but there were always one or two extra and I'd get them and bite into them with foolish confidence, believing her when she said I was safe to eat at will, always surprised when they burst in my mouth like capsules of soap. Bastard cardamoms! Or she made Armenian lamb that you could smell in the house for two days after, which her husband called armpit lamb. His preference was tater tot casserole, one of his own mother's recipes. Emma would recount the creation of the dish as though admitting to war crimes, unable to look up from the table when she spoke of the frozen potato gems, the tinned cream of mushroom soup, the pounds of shredded cheese, the potato chips crumbled on top. Emma taught me about curry and kebabs, Northern Italy and Bangkok. And I gave it my best, too. I read cookbooks and would memorize the recipes and act like I was just whipping

something up in her kitchen, a bunker of brown paper sacks full of ingredients around me. Somehow it would get done, no one part of the meal hot at the same time, and we'd eat the burned steaks and mushy asparagus at midnight with our plates on our laps on the floor, drunk and starving, and then we'd kiss because we'd both had garlic and it was okay. We were in it together. For us, sometimes, food was love.

NOW WE ATE and drank and shared everything, sails full and on course for a good afternoon drunk, and I could not remember when I'd had a better goddamn meal. My mouth felt slick with lemon, olive, thyme, coated with goat cheese. Emma was giddy and telling me about Evangelia's son, Michalis Daskolakis, the Don of Elounda, who carried a shotgun in his pickup truck—Nothing new to you Americans, Emma said and I grinned like a mental patient.

Emma and her friend Debbie had christened Michalis the mayor, as there was no such legal office. Michalis ruled the village with his elite cronies—mostly taxi drivers—including the father and son Yannis and Manolis—a very common name in Greece, and, it seemed, on this side of the island in particular—who ran the diesel Mercedes firm in Elounda's town square. These were the men who ordered frappes from Emma at Evangelia's by, as she put it, doing a vigorous wanking motion, and who took Emma's visiting mother into the hills and did suggestive things with a banana, a story Emma had told me before but I laughed at hearing again.

Emma said, Michalis used to make us hide in the dustbins out behind Evangelia's when the police came.

In the dumpster? Why? I said.

We were exploited ex pats, working eighteen hours a day for five months straight, Emma said.

You mean illegal, I said.

Emma blew her hair out of her eyes dismissively. She said, It was one of those times, actually, when Debbie was hiding in the dustbin that Evangelia told her she was popping home to milk the chickens. But Evange had also decided around that time that Deb's real name was Betty—and did tend to get a great deal wrong, including the freezer temperature, much to the chagrin of the entire town one week.

Emma looked suddenly to the crust of pizza on her plate, her eyes flying open in panic.

Do you think the mussels are a bit off? She said.

I've been waiting three years to hear you say that, I said.

What?

I don't think I've ever seen you have a bite of shellfish you didn't suspect, I said. But you always order it.

Do I? Emma said. She swallowed hard, overacting, and she stuck out her tongue and we both laughed. All the wine was gone. Job well done. Emma said, Are you alright that you came with me?

I am, I said.

I never imagined that you'd actually come to Crete, she said.

I wish I could say that I knew I would, but I didn't.

Are you still ill from last night? Emma said. You were very upset.

I don't know why I say the things I say sometimes.

Neither do I, Emma said. About me, I mean. I mean, I don't know why I say things, too. Sometimes.

I moved a dark knob of bread through the olive oil smear on my plate, but could not bring myself to put it in my mouth. I said, I'm going to go out there at some point, even if you think it's stupid.

Spinalonga?

Yes, I said.

Emma said, As I said, be my guest.

I said, I'm going to go out and have a cigarette.

You can smoke in here, Emma said.

I know, I said and was going to say something about how we didn't have to spend every minute together, the kind of wry joke she might have liked some other time. But our buzzy good relations were new and fluttery, and I knew how fast things could come crashing down with just one wrong damn thing, and I didn't say anything else. I got up and Emma looked at me like she too had expected me to ruin the moment, awed that I would instead take the graceful exit from this moment to the balcony.

The thick wooden door was like the back door you'd have at your house in America, and it seemed like everything in Medusa was not from a restaurant at all but from someone's grandmother's house. I stepped outside onto the deck and closed the heavy door behind me. There was a man out there on the rail, the father of the two girls at the other table, and he looked at me. He wore a thin linen jacket that adhered to him like cellophane in the warm wind. His smile told me I had had a conversation with him at some point the night before.

Pleased to see that you survived last night, said the man. He was tall and broad-shouldered, but soft-looking. He did not laugh now but I remembered his laugh, and I could see myself talking to him, the movement of my hands, the tilt of my head to mimic the angle of his own, but instead of my own words, all I could hear was the tone, agreeable, cocky, blathering. The man stood before me now as he had then, with sloped, sympathetic brows, interested, safe in his own skin. A gentleman. A gentle man.

Yes... I said and we shook hands. I said, I guess I did hit it a little hard yesterday.

You're young, he said and he smiled and because he said so with authority it seemed true. He said, If I'd had more than what you saw me have I'd still be in bed. Once you hit a certain age, you don't bounce back.

Emma used to say that, I said. She was furious that I didn't get hangovers. She said I would when I hit twenty three.

And did you? said the man.

I thought I was going to die, I said and lit a cigarette. I offered one to the man and he waved his hand no. It had been at Bar Sorrento we had met. Something about Kentucky Bourbon. I said, Sometimes I'm never sure if I've come out of the fog of my first hangover.

The man said, Things seem to be improved between you and your traveling companion.

Last night I had been talking about Emma. Out to convict her in her absence. And in my drunkenness, which was like my absence, too. Now words bubbled up into the blather of my memory, and they were, She's just pissed off with me that I didn't love her enough to move to London. I winced, faked hard concentration on my cigarette, tumbling back through the dark stairwells inside myself to the crashed shardpiles of every lie I've ever told. I blew out hard. I said, I'm sorry. I've forgotten your name.

We're on holiday, your worry isn't needed, the man said. Patrick Moulder.

Thanks, I said and reintroduced myself and we shook hands again. Please don't take it personally, I said.

In that case I don't suppose it would do much good asking if you managed to get that autograph?

It might jog a memory, I said. But probably not.

It was a silly thing, Patrick Moulder said. The girls have forgotten all about it now.

Your daughters are the blonde girls who were harassing Gerald, and they want an autograph, I said to myself. I took a deep drag as a reward. It was a good cigarette. As one out of every two or three thousand will sometimes seem.

What were they—

His words, I said. And he's kind of paranoid.

Even so, if he feels that—

Not at all. I'll get the autograph, I said. He's that famous?

The girls seem to think so, Patrick Moulder said. Isn't that the way it always is?

Sure, I said.

At any rate, I'm happy to see you're getting along.

Thank you.

Perhaps you'll join us for dinner one of these nights, Patrick Moulder said.

The two of you. Are you here till the fifteenth?

I honestly couldn't tell you, I said. I couldn't guess within five days what day it is now.

Well. Should you get the opportunity.

I will.

I looked inside the streaked window, and Emma was leaning over the back of her chair and talking to Patrick Moulder's girls. The tall one, Nadine, took after her father in features, but Patrick assured me that she would grow up to be quite beautiful,

and Cara, who was two years older, was already a very pretty girl. I thought of Emma when she'd first come to Crete. I wanted to take a photograph of this now, so there would never be a time when I could not come back here to it. My own memory was already turning the moment into something other than it was, and now, years later, it is hard to distill a single image. This is what I saw: the girls were smiling and laughing, and Patrick's wife Sharon was speaking warmly to Emma, and Emma's back was to us but I did not need to see her face. But then as I remember it, so much else begins to intrude—the bare arm thrown over the back of the chair let me know that she was confident. The puff of her chest told me she felt almost beautiful. That she was not fussing with her hair meant that she was not lost in her own head. Her right foot bouncing away at the end of her crossed leg with the sandal dangling on her toe meant that she was drunk. When she laughed I could hear it through everything, it still shot into me every time, but what she was saying was muted, less like words and more like the sound of music made by rubbing a fingertip on the lip of a wineglass. It didn't matter what she said now in the restaurant like a grandmother's house behind glass like a bottle, or what I had said last night to some stranger in a pub for English tourists. We were on Crete together. In my ears were the wind of the lagoon and the lapping of the water on the shore below. I leaned on the rail and smoked, and watched the women and the girls through the window, and Patrick set his elbows next to me and stared out at Spinalonga. Emma looked over her shoulder, to me, slow through the sauce-thick air in that room and like frozen time itself through the rivers of glass in the pane and then flying through the sea air outside and that silence in between us, and

her smile cooled to something smaller but better, and her looking at me pinned me in place.

You can't say anything new about the sea, Patrick said and exhaled. It's all been done.

Emma was still looking at me, and I looked back hard and she didn't look away, just for one long second. Long enough to let me know that she was still there. That she was not forever closed to me. A glimpse over the ramparts. And then she looked away.

People still try, I said.

Patrick said, They should. How else are they ever going to get it?

BACK TO ELOUNDA. She said there was a beach on the other side of town, near The Dutch Bar. We parked in the main square and walked along the wharf, full of small salty fishing boats painted skyblue and bonewhite and red and yellow, with large crosses lashed to the prows. Larger vessels to take the tourists to Spinalonga creaked and knocked against the pier. I bought a pack of cigarettes at a kiosk next to a playground with bales of celebrity magazines and newspapers that spread out over the sidewalk into the road. I could have Camel Lights there, but I chose Assos. Emma did not say anything about them, that she was happy I was keeping with the theme. I smoked and wished I'd bought the Camels. She watched children crash from slides into the gravel, and I was not in the first hundred things on her mind.

We walked along the promenade on the edge of the water. In the center of the lagoon was a white cube that said Kalidon Floating Restaurant, white as sunshine on an igloo. Nearer, on the promenade we passed men sitting on a platform carpeted with astroturf selling tickets to Spinalonga, but there were few people out in the hot part of the day, and the men were too tired even to bother with us. A young girl in the square made slow, slow turns on her pink bicycle. Another chased after a soccer ball that bounced across our path, and the children's parents watched from chairs at the taxi queue, other children on their laps and squealing happily, filling the afternoon air like birds. The sign above where they all sat said Drivers Only, and it made me smile. The girl ran back to them with her soccer ball, flashing the white soles of her new shoes.

We walked down along the shore, on a path not meant for tourists, cast already in shadow from the hotels and tavernas and empty concrete skeletons above on the road. The earth was pulverized brick and turned Emma's toes red in her sandals. I looked out and could not see Olous under the water, blackening in the shadow like an inkspill. We said nothing as we found our way down the rocky path, through weeds as thick as my wrist and past burst open bags of trash. Our eyes were nearly level with the patio of a restaurant called Lotus Eaters, and I looked up hopefully to it, feeling the urgency for more to drink, and I reached for Emma's hand, but she was six feet in front of me and that's how she walked the rest of the way.

We walked to what had been The Dutch Bar, and it looked like everything else. A wooden deck jettied out into the water, and Emma did not tell me that was where she had had her bar, something I knew as soon as I saw it, a memory we shared

although I had never been a part of it. There was nothing on the deck now, not even a sign of wear from seasalt or sun, and no chairs or tables or a sandwich board with tonight's drink specials. Next to the door were two nude female mannequins, hairless, arms and hands twisted into the harsh right angles favored by mannequins and never by real people.

On the deck of the Dutch Bar Emma would work barefoot, and the Dutch owners Maarten and Robbie would sit at her bar and drink until everyone else had gone, and Maarten would grin like a turtle. He still had all of his baby teeth, and he had womanly hips, and had once had an erection last for over a year. It was when he was drunk and admiring Emma one night that he had said to her, You know I did it with a man, once. Maarten was Emma's boyfriend.

And the American military men on leave would come to drink with Emma, the surf splashing from the rocks onto the backs of her legs. Spinalonga a tombstone of shadow in the deep blue behind her. The men would get drunk and do one-armed push-ups while Emma and the other English girls who worked there sat on their backs, something that they'd all seen in movies. Or they'd do pull-ups from the fixtures on the lamplights, and they'd try to get the new guy fucked up, or the sergeant fucked up, or the guy who always got fucked up fucked up. Emma had told me before of her life at The Dutch Bar. I realized as we walked across the deck of the Katafigio Club that I had not once, for a single second, had any image in my mind when she'd told me. I had not heard her because I did not want to hear about Maarten. And I did not want to hear about the American Air Force pilot who did not do push-ups on the pier, but instead got sick, and she took him home to her apartment by the church in the center

of town. He cried all night and told her he loved her even though he called her Anna. I did not like to think about it because she had married that Air Force pilot, and had a son by him, and when he brought her home to America, I fell in love with her and did everything I could to take her away from him. And for awhile it worked. I did not like to think about the next part, when someone else took her away from me before we made it to the end. But now I didn't have to think about anything. I followed her away from the deck of the Dutch Bar like it was nothing, and then it was. The mannequins' flat eyes looked out to where we had been.

We passed a short cobblestone tower with what looked like a wagon wheel at the top. Suddenly chatty, Emma told me it was from the old saltworks, and that column of rock was a cistern. The seawater in it evaporated in the sun and left salt for cooking. The saltworks of Elounda had been in use since Venetian times, she said, but had stopped functioning a few years ago. No one knew why, she said, but it had been so long since we had said anything, all I could say was, Aha.

Emma stopped on a sandier stretch of shore and looked back and looked ahead. I did not ask if this was the beach she had been thinking of, and she did not say. There was no one else around. The swath of dark pebbled sand had no footprints. She set her bag on the ground and pulled out a towel.

Emma lay back and took in the sun, Lawrence's Durrell's *The Black Book* held to shadow her eyes. I took off my shirt and flipped off the boat shoes and walked gingerly down the shore, out onto the slippery blades of black rock that sloped into the water, picking each step, correcting my balance, the cold splashes on my toes. I went in all at once, the shock of the water punching out my breath, instantly and horrifically

sober, and I tread water for a minute and it was alright to be in that cold. I swam out into the sea on my back, my ears full of water. I lay that way for a long time, deaf. The glug of a bubble and nothing else. The muscles in my back eased apart, and I had not even realized I felt stiff.

There was a ship in the distance and I thought I might reach it without trying, returning to the idea of absence. I could climb aboard and help them bring in their catch. We would drink retsina from leather casks and call each other My Friend. They would be pulling in lobsters from traps on the sea floor, but the traps would not be the ones I recognized from American television—the traps would be old genius at work, some mechanism comprised of simple truth. The fishermen would give me a sandy net of lobsters for my dinner. I would decline and they would nod at me, close their eyes meaningfully, and make me know that it would offend their deep and proud culture if I were to say no. They would not play against type, and I would think something about how we need stereotypes to fill in the gaps truth cannot satisfy.

As we trolled back in to the shore, they would see the beautiful woman on the beach, and they would whistle, and say three times the Greek word for hot. They would look to me, the question in their dark eyes, and I would nod. But then I would say, But not anymore. A long time ago.

Why no now, my friend?

It's complicated, I would say as Emma sat up on the beach, seeing me, amused to see me on a boat full of Greeks.

No complicated. Man is man, woman is woman. See how she looks at you, my friend.

I see it, it's so simple, I would say but would be remembering her looking out at me on the deck of Medusa in Plaka. But even as I was telling my Greek fishermen friends that I knew Emma's soul or that all that was required of me to save her and us from our past was to act now, to bravely crash upon her with the naïve, drunk look of love that had won her in the first place, I knew none of it was true. The memory of us and how we had been was fading, from our muscles and our thoughts, replaced with something else. And there it was—I could see it now from the rail of the lobster boat—that same, gorgon stare. Emma like a golden idol risen from the temple of Olous. I had fallen for it again, like always, but now something had changed. She was looking at me that way because she knew she could, and all she wanted to know was if I was still there.

I shook myself awake, suddenly panicked, startled to find myself so far out from the shore, Emma an insect on the black beach in the distance. But the fishing boat was still unreachable, I'd somehow gotten no closer. I gasped, tread water. The strong flavors of the meal now sucked the moisture from my gums, blasted on sicksweet booze breath. The sun had roasted my skin where it breached the surface, and as I swam hard back to shore, the slap of the water was like little electric bites. Relief came over me as my toes touched bottom. I staggered recklessly up the beach, ankles twisting. Breathless. I did not stop to collect myself. Did not stop until I stood over her, eclipsing her sun.

I said, I've been lying to you.

Emma had taken off her top, her breasts dark brown but burning to red, and she covered them with her arm and her book. Are you drunk? she said. I told you this morning, I don't want to know anything.

I'm telling you anyway, I said and inhaled.

Emma sat up. She said, Don't. Emma pulled her top from her waist and tied it behind her neck.

I came to see you, Emma, I said. Is this what you wanted it to be like, with you and me.

No, she said and I thought she might cry.

I blew smoke and looked out to the ship and the friends on the lobster boat I would never have. For me either, I said.

Emma said, But you came.

I shouldn't have, I said and stared out at the sea and smoked. I said, I should have gone with you after my mother died, but it was too much to ask of you.

I don't want to hear it, Emma said and then, How dare you! Emma screamed at me and burst into tears. You're horrible! She threw her book down and kicked sand at me and I backed away.

Emma panted and held her knees, said, I can't talk to you without sounding ridiculous, she said. She swallowed, caught her breath and each word was something she stabbed out at the sea as she looked past me. I have treated you terribly, she said. You always made an enormous effort and were very lovely to me, and to my son. The reason that I chucked you so rashly was that I thought you would take me back when I

inevitably changed my mind. I have learned my lesson—that I cannot treat people like shit and expect them to forgive me. I am very sorry that I hurt you. I can't believe that I could hurt someone that I love so much. But we can't go back again. I spent so long thinking that it was unlikely that you would take me back, that I decided I would never ask. I had lost you for good. I hoped you would find somebody who was happy and uncomplicated—and undemanding—who didn't have any horrible past associations, like a husband, for instance. I'll always regret that I drove you away. But when you called and said you were coming to London, and I saw you, everything was different. I didn't think I would ever see you again, and there you were. You seemed so happy, like success found you, and I knew I was right. That you would move on, and that you would only ever be happy if I was completely erased. And when you said you'd come to Crete with me, I thought finally we could move on together, that this meant you had actually forgiven me, finally. And we could be friends. And that somehow that would make what I had done, not only to you, but cheating on my husband, that somehow it would free me from judgment.

I shook my head. I said, I hope your conscience is at ease, Emma. But if my not wanting to pretend means that I haven't forgiven you, then I guess I haven't.

You can never resist the temptation to make me out to be a complete bitch, she said and then her calm was gone. Can't we just have a nice day without thinking about everything?

I'm sorry you feel that way, I said. My back is aching. I'm going to go back to the hotel and lie down for awhile. Can I have a towel?

You're leaving?

When I get back home I'll figure out a way to repay you, for the hotel and the plane ticket, I said. I reached for her bag.

Don't tell my you're thinking about leaving early, she said.

I hadn't thought of that, I said. But maybe that's the best thing.

I can't believe you would do such a thing to me, she said.

I had to tell you, I said. I pulled the bag open, and there was nothing inside, no towel for me.

You were supposed to bring your own, Emma said softly and I knew that she wished she had something to give me right then, as though the whole day had been a game and now we were at the end, revealing the score, and because she had not thought of me when she packed it proved something after all.

I nodded. Of course.

I pulled on my shirt and slipped my sandy feet into the boat shoes and did not look at her and went back into town. The cistern, Katifigio Club, Olous in inky black, Lotus Eaters full of people. I dripped and smoked. At the market next to Ble, the towels were all airbrushed pornography and expensive. I headed in the direction of the taxi queue in the main square, walking all the way among a crowd of people going the same way. When I stopped, they kept going, further down the road to the church, and I looked to the bell tower and waited for it to toll. I went into a shop and pulled a towel with a map of Crete on it down from a rack. A man came inside smoking a cigarette and took the towel from me.

You buy later, he said. Come outside now. Funeral.

I stepped outside with the man who held my tourist towel. Along the shadowed street, at All-In-One Creperie and Taverna and at Friends Café and at Dmitri's Steak House and The Camelot the people stood, and from the shops came the owners and closed the doors behind them. The road had cleared and now came the procession. First, two young men in matador outfits, carrying wreaths on long poles plugged into their hips. Then a priest in square black robes, bearded, chanting and bowing his head as he walked, a censer on a gold rope. And then the hearse. The bubble-domed black car I'd seen on the hill when I was waiting for the bus. People followed. The women were very old and short and all dressed in black, and the men were old, too, and fat.

It was old man, said the Greek next to me. Killed at the wedding of his own son.

When the procession had gone, the man unlocked his shop and sold me the towel for seven thousand drachmas. On the counter next to the register were decks of pornographic playing cards. On one, a close-up of a darkly tanned vagina plugged with a banana. The label on the deck of cards advertised Beautiful Fotos. The man saw me looking at them, and he got out another deck from under the counter. These are good quality, he said. Better than those. And he pointed to a pile of fake Louis Vuitton wallets in plastic wrap on a table. Very good price, he said. I shook my head, and saw sunglasses. I pulled a pair from the display and tried them on. They only cost twenty-five hundred, the price of five beers, five Coca-Colas, or half a Russian prostitute.

I went across the street to three parked Mercedes at the queue. I waved to the drivers and stood by the first car in the line. No one looked at me. The drivers and their wives were all standing now, some holding their children by their shoulders in front of them, the kids standing on their parents' feet, all still and quietly facing the church. I went over to them.

I need a taxi, I said.

One of the drivers shook himself from a dream, and he took me to the first Mercedes and we got inside.

Hera Village, I said and when I sat the small of my back felt sore from swimming. We pulled out onto the road and headed back out of town.

Emma was on the other side of the road as we passed, standing in the middle of Evangelia's patio and she looked in the direction from which I had come. Whatever we had had together was born with her on Crete, before she had a husband and son. When we met, I was the person she had been just three years before, someone who could fall asleep on a ferry and end up in the port of Athens, or stay up until dawn in an Ibiza disco. Someone who could fall madly in love and not regard about any single thing except for how it felt.

I did not know if she wanted me to see her in the place where she had been happiest. And I did not know if she wanted to show me that I was no longer the unweighted soul she had mistaken me to be, but had become part of the life in America that she'd shed, that whatever she was going to be next was not up to me. But it was clear to me now that she had not brought me here with her to become

anything new. We would never experience the awfulness of knowing each other as friends. At least that was something.

Whether she had come to Crete to say goodbye to it or not, it would be on Crete that I would say goodbye to her. I eased low into the seat of the taxi.

Your first time on Crete? said the driver, but he was still at the funeral, outside of this moment with me.

No, I said. Yes, I mean.

You've been here before?

No, I said. It just feels like it.

CAFÉ AOUAS

I SLEPT. When I woke I was on the same stool in the hotel I'd gone to after the Poseidon, outside the central barroom, with Manolis leaning through the service window and across a hundred dirty beer glasses to tap his cigarette into my ashtray, redskinned and crowned with red light from the bar behind him. On the next stool was the father of the boy named Connor, Connor and his mother knocking pool balls across the table. A beer in the claw of my hand, words in my mouth and in the black engine fire air. The look in Connor's father's eyes said that my story had lost him. Or that I had lost the story. Connor had his own eyes level with the table. His cue awkwardly skewed through space, elbows akimbo. His nose scrunched in resolve. I pushed my empty bottle into the glasses behind me, got my cigarettes. There was a sheet of newspaper under my pack. I unfolded it, a page from a British tabloid. The Mirror, maybe. A large photograph of doctors and nurses in a line, too good-looking. Their bodies angled in for the camera, factual eyes and flirtatious mouths. Someone had written in orange magic marker over the photograph. Of course. Gerald's autograph. And there he was, second from the right, stethoscope like a slash over his shoulder, the same black slant as his eyebrow. For Carrie and Nadine, he wrote. Gerald Coulthard, Summer Holiday, One Night Looking Over Mirabello Bay.

I held the picture, my unlit cigarette between my fingertips, lighter cocked against the thumb of my other hand. Manolis said to me, You are too tired of

thinking. You go to your room, and when the Englishwoman Emma comes in, I will send her to you.

I forgot that this wasn't another night, I said.

I woke up. I found a vegetable shop among the souvenir kiosks up from the harbor in Aghios Nikolaos. I bought cucumbers and tomatoes and a green pepper, a jar of kalamata olives, olive oil and the only bottle of vinegar in the store. When I asked for feta, the man at the counter opened the Coca-Cola case behind him and reached into a big tin and set a six-inch square of cheese dripping in brine on a sheet of butcher paper on a scale. Not so much, I said and he carved off a corner with his pocketknife. I nodded, and he wrapped it up. I bought pistachios and two apples and a pear. And this, I said and grabbed a flask-shaped bottle of ouzo marked with the minotaur, and I looked again at that tin of feta. The Greek letter F looks like this: Φ. Like the opposite of an hourglass.

I woke up. I walked along the municipal beach in Elounda. The raw oiled flesh of the men and women on cots hissed pink in coconut marinade. A tour train rolled by—a carriage in two sections made to look like a locomotive, but with rubber wheels, no track, and a dollop of fake steam. Chugga-chugga, chugga-chugga, whoo-whooot came the recorded effects through tinny speakers. *The municipal beach of Elounda overlooks the village's historic lagoon and Spinalonga, the Isle of Tears...* The tourists in the bus looked out through their camera lenses past the other tourists, splayed out on the beach, to the old fortress across the glossy lagoon.

Here along the promenade, on the steps of every market were the postcards on spinners. In one, an old man with no teeth smiles. In another, an old woman does not

smile. Here is a photograph of Aghios Nikolaos from the air, one at night with a pink moon like a spacecraft, one in the day, one from the lake, one from the sea. There are photographs of Elounda only in the day. The harbor. An old woman rides a donkey. A naked woman's sandy behind. A side-shot of a small naked breast, zoomed in very close. Three naked women look out at the sunset. A waitress's ruffled skirt is blown up by the wind, and she, like every other young woman in the postcards, has Suzy Quattro hair. A naked man with a luxuriant mustache lounges on the beach and eats grapes. White buildings from every angle, trimmed in that same blue, the sea and the sky everywhere. And on every spinner, a postcard of the same Minoan sculpture, a horned male figure, grinning for the camera, leaning backward to balance the weight of his enormous penis. I held the postcards before my eyes, thumbed through them, choosing which I would send to friends back home. Then put them back in the rack and walked away, found a taverna and had an Amstel.

I sat at Zorba's Café. I sat at Dmitri's, where no one else sat. A man with a mustache that whorled up to his eyes found a chair on the patio and sang drunkenly to the bouzouki music. Dmitri, I guessed. I smoked, read the menu twice, closed it and waited, then read the menu again in Dutch, German, French. No one came to take my order. Time passed by unmeasured. Dmitri sang and bounced his knee. Then with no prompt, he turned to me and asked if I was there to eat. I nearly screamed yes, and asked him for a gyro and a beer, and it seemed this was not the answer he had expected, and he breathed hard and went inside and there was a long, loud exchange in the kitchen and the rattle of pots and pans. Then Dmitri sat down again and sang. I smoked the rest of my cigarettes. What he finally brought me was like no gyro I had

seen, and it was not good, and the beer never came. A fat boy in a yellow T-shirt rode up on his vespa to Dmitri, set the checker-patterned shoe of his right foot on the patio and argued with the owner in Greek through the window made by his flipped-up visor, then rode away. People walked past me, alone in the chilly shadow on Dmitri's patio, slowly chewing the strips of strange meat on sliced white bread with flavorless yogurt and a pile of fries cooked in fishy oil.

I sat in a taverna in the middle of the night while two Englishmen chatted up the ugly English bartender as she ignored me and my empty beer and empty whiskey glass. I ate some of the peanuts and potato chips she had set on the bar in front of me. Cheddar and sour cream Ruffles. I was not hungry. Was not anything. On the television, American professional wrestling. But I had known that when I went in. From behind, the bartender had looked beautiful.

I wandered into a grocery store and saw bottles of water shaped like rockets, whole frozen fish thrown together in bins, canned mushroom soup made by Heinz, and Heinz salad cream, and Heinz curry, Eight Hot Dogs In Brine. A skinned rabbit on a plate in a deli case with its entrails displayed, still attached, on a tea saucer next to it, the rag of red meat dried by the stale air. At the register was a rack of croissants in red mylar wrappers under the brand name Platoon. I looked at toaster ovens, scuba fins, children's pen and pencil sets with Disney themes. But there was nothing I wanted, no new experience would attach itself to me.

In the antiquities museum in Aghios Nikolaos, I moved through rooms of stone pots and a case that held the oldest stiletto in the world. In one gallery was a collection of clay coffins called larnakes, painted with octopi, that another civilization

dug up a thousand years later and used as bathtubs. In the next room was a cross-section of excavation, of three stacked skeletons, and in the next the mottled skull of an Olympian, a crown of leaves laid in around his petrified brow in papery gold. Against the skull leaned the silver coin from its mouth, Charon the boatman's fare to take the Olympian across the River Styx. The attendant, a Greek woman in casual clothes and smoking a cigarette, said to me, Do not touch the glass. Outside on the steps were piles and piles of more larnakes. Behind the museum was a field full of larnakes, all like the ones I had paid to see inside, once crypts whose bones were thrown out to make space for the bathwater, now nothing at all. I went back to the hotel and drank away a long afternoon. Swam in the empty pool as the sun set.

In the coming evening the light bounced off the surface of the pool and made an array across the mosaic on the easternmost bungalow wall. The waves made waves of rich aquamarine light on the broken tiles, light that jumped like loose electric wires, and as the sun continued to set the reflection rose higher up the wall, until the sea under the dolphins filled with waves and then at once went dark as the sun disappeared behind the hills. I changed into fresh clothes and went back to the bar and no one noticed I had gone.

I slept. I woke up. Stretched my foot out from under the sheet. My eyes would not open. My face felt flushed with sunburn and beer, my undereyes puffed and meaty. The daylight white filled the wall. Next to me in the wall socket was a glowing red knob holding a fragrant strip of cardboard. A chocolate air freshener, sickly sweet. Like English chocolate—like Cadbury, the taste of childhood Easter morning in America, and only Easter morning. I pulled the knob from the wall and

stuffed it between my mattress and the stone, but there it was, that odor up into my head. I pushed my face into the underside of the pillow. The groceries were still in a plastic sack on the table. There was no refrigerator in the room. But the ouzo was all gone.

I woke up and read an Agatha Christie mystery novel I found in the hotel lobby. I smoked sixty cigarettes, drank beers that I did not count, and finished the book. So, I thought, that's an Agatha Christie novel.

I lay too long in the sun by the pool, too hungover to dream, and woke up and saw my skin go dark, dark copper. Where I put on sunblock, I had missed some space, and the bare flesh rose up like welts in the pattern of my hand on my left shoulder, like the puffs under my eyes, the spaces between fingers red and the fingers themselves dark brown, a handshape pressed down into my skin. I slept.

I lay in bed, stared at the glacial blue glow of the moon on the ceiling in the middle of the night. Emma in the bathroom. Two steps. The sink. A cough. The lid of the waste bin next to the toilet. The tinkle of her pee. A flush, and the bin again. The door opened, and her light cut into mine, and I left my hand on my forehead. Then a click, the light gone and mine returned. The rustle of her sheets. My own fingers against the stubble of my cheek. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Goodnight Alex, she said from the other room. Night, I said.

I slept. I do not know what I dreamed, but sometimes I needed to leave that space so quickly I slapped the wall, came up heart-stopped like I'd woken up under water. But other times I remained in the dream. Scared but unable to run, afraid but punching as though through syrup, desperate to kiss some unknown lips but rejected.

Unlike the lobster boat, these were dreams outside of my storyline, like foreign films with no subtitles, and meant very little to me now. Only when I forgot to be unafraid would I choose the gasping leap, up, into my own skin. In the morning, I woke and thought to go back into the dream, into the terror of some labyrinthine car chase through a forest, and shifted every muscle and bone just once, my body as tired as if I had worked a sixty-hour week. The cool sheets liquefied like ice on my sunburn. I breathed and closed my eyes.

I woke up. I waited for the bus into Aghios Nikolaos. I had caught it twice and paid the hundred drachmas and was taken to the same place as the taxis, around the corner from Sorrento and the Armida. To go west you stood fifty paces up the hill on the opposite side of the road, in the low slope of a driveway of a rich man who lived up on the mountain where you couldn't see. He rolled past me in his Mercedes, hidden behind black windows, not waiting for a gap in traffic, and drove away.

There was nowhere to sit on this side of the road. I waited. I did not want to find Manolis to ask for a taxi. I looked down to the town. It could only be a few miles. Three at the most. Probably not even that. My legs were already moving. I crossed the road and walked past the hotel and past the softly flapping flags and went on down the hill.

An antique farm truck pulled over on the roadshoulder before me. Two men got out of the cab and another took a tall step down from the open bed. A giant metal spike over his shoulder. One of the men from the cab balanced a sledgehammer on his toes and dragged his foot toward the edge of the hill, and they all met at the nearest white shrine. I got closer, saw them lay hands on the dollhouse, look through it, test

its sturdiness. The man with the spike knelt and angled the dark metal wedge end between the shrine and the stone base. He looked up with no expression to the man with the sledgehammer. His hands flashed open palms. He stood back and suddenly the man with the sledgehammer hoisted it out of the dust, whipped it through the air, and drove the head against the spike. The other man stood there, rubbed his eye, looked at the tip of his finger, rubbed his eye again, and looked at me, staring at him.

I went back to the hotel and Manolis was not there. It was his father behind the counter in the lobby, asleep on his feet, head settled into the fat of his neck. I moved into his light, and the magnifying glass eyes snapped open. The head rose, the white hair fanned back. Mr. Hughes? Taxi into Aghios Nikolaos? he said.

I did not tell him I was not who I thought I was, perhaps some phantom from his sleep. Please, I said.

The taxi took me to where the bridge met the sea and the lake. I walked along the lake, called Voulesmeni on the map at the queue. I passed a café sign, a column of stacked photographs gone green with age. I was not hungry for Spageti Special From Oven. I bought a pack of Assos at a kiosk and went out to a concrete platform with a bare flagpole overlooking the lake, the last place fully struck with light by the afternoon sun. I felt awake. A Japanese girl skipped up to the top tier of the platform to take a photograph of her girlfriend, hands on hips, one foot kicked out, head cocked and squinting in the light. Two small fishing boats in the lapping water below. The girl on the platform waited for the right moment, and groups of tourists on either side of the girl by the lake held up to create an aisle, standing as though behind ropes. I smoked. Voulesmeni was not much of a lake, but I liked a lake in the center of a

town, and I liked the staircase that descended from the peak of the steep hill above, winding down and through the trees and vines to a pier at the lake's farthest corner. At the very top was a long restaurant, and its marquee said SKAI CAFÉ in bright blue letters as big as the signs on American grocery stores. And I liked the names of the cafés around the water, the Café Must, The Gorgon, Hellas, Restaurant Neon, Tavern The Pine, and, across the lake from where I stood, The Café DuLac, the only sign I could read on the opposite shore—all of the restaurants with the same bright backlit photographs of herculean blue martinis and chocolate fabrications, all with the same illustrated menu of moussaka and cheeseburgers. Here an omelet was an entrée. But if you saw the word omelet in the description of something else, it meant that whatever it was came with an egg, as in, cheeseburger with omelet. French fries came on every plate. You sat down at a café and looked at the menu and wondered if you had eaten there before. You already knew the descriptions and photographs of the food. You wondered if you were remembering or flashing forward, into the mundane of déjà vu. Then you recognized the Steak Dianne, the béarnaise sauce garnished with gray ash. You chose your restaurant by the color of its chairs and awnings, the angle at which you would like the sun to come upon you. You sat forever and ever, time failed to elapse. You watched the fishing boats return to their moorings, all blue and white and trimmed red, and the song It's A Small World After All came into your head and you laughed, and when you stopped laughing your gaze fixed on the crazy, thick palm trees which grew fatter and fatter toward the top, like nothing you had seen, some of them twenty feet tall, spiked like pineapples, and you thought that it may be a small world but there was still plenty of it you had not seen. And everywhere you

could enjoy Nescafé, milk, juices, the best fruit juices, creamy milkshakes, Coca-Cola but instead had Amstels straight out of the bottle. A man at the edge of every patio beseeched the passersby to dine at his restaurant. One of them reminded you of Beethoven. The hair, the flowy white shirt. But then you realized that what you were thinking was not that the man actually reminded you of Beethoven, but of something someone had said once, how someone else had looked like this, and how the woman who had told you had laughed and pressed her face into your chest to keep from laughing so loud. But then you knew that this wasn't him, the man who'd reminded her of Beethoven, and now he held out the menu of his café, nodding meaningfully at the beautiful photos, and said to a party of four, Please, please, come inside. We are good people.

Emma had told me something about Evangelia, years ago. How she would stand on the steps of her taverna in Elounda, lovingly stroking a frozen pizza to lure customers. You like, is good, is very, very fresh, Evangelia would say, and every time Emma told the story we both laughed, the same kind of laugh she would give when someone reminded her of Beethoven.

I walked toward an ouzeri, hot from idling on the balmy platform, the Japanese girls long gone. I went toward shade, under the festooned awnings and strange inverted palms, and then I was in a part of the town where I had not yet been, at the edge of an open-air bazaar that ran up the road in front of me in a valley of buildings, up the hill and beyond its crest. An aisle of heads. I went up into it.

There were rows of vendors on both sides of the road, some under broad canopies and others selling out of open vans or from cardboard boxes at their feet.

There were piles of women's handbags and English women digging through them like children. And there were whole tents of Nike, Adidas, Tommy Hilfiger, and Levi's 501s in tall stacks. You could see heads floating over the jeans, nostrils full of new denim. I climbed the hill. Lines of people moved up the hill and down the hill, and through the lines, and I was a dot in one of those lines. I stepped out of it. A man in a white Greek-flag T-shirt stood smoking in the back of a delivery truck in the alley, boxes of cologne in heaps on the tailgate in front of him. He looked back into his empty truck, uninterested in the customers picking through his bootleg Coolwater and CK One. An Englishman showed me a box of Drakkar Noir. He said, I'll just buy a bunch of this stuff and return it to Marks and Spencer for credit. He showed me a bottle of GoGo Chnnel.

The vendors stood in the middle of their lots, all of them smoking, impartial but watching. Under one great green awning was a woman in her late thirties with an astonishing outline and cat eyes and Mafia hair, her tight black shirt cut low. She smoked and flashed long red fingernails. I swerved to her booth and picked through some bright T-shirts. A baby blue one with dolphins said Creta. An orange one with the minotaur in his labyrinth said Kriti. I held up the orange one. The woman had gone back into the alley. Her disinterest was true.

On the hilltop below the hospital the bazaar forked and became a bustling produce market, the carts smaller and less orderly than the garment vendors' tents, and I bumped through the crowd past the sellers of dried Cretan herbs, and a sign that said Local Honey of Thyme, and below it, glass bulbs of honey packed with herbs and walnuts. There were stands with crates of green grapes, plums, peaches, apples,

carrots, potatoes, watercress, bananas, a wagon surrounded by broadbeans, almonds, chestnuts, and pistachios in peeled-back burlap sacks. I knew the vegetables were cooking on the table back in the hotel room at Hera Village, already days old and forgotten, the sour feta brine leaking out into the grocery bag. I passed a man grilling souvlaki over charcoal on a tiny grate, and I realized I had been smelling that scorched pork from all the way down by the lake. A small line snaked around his van, people with drachmas already leaving their fingertips. I looked up—on the fourth floor of the hospital balcony, an old lady in a pink robe was smoking, an IV drip on the frame next to her. I waved. She waved back

Then were the fishmongers, and a stink like the marina, but hot and full of windless air. The smell popped a bubble in your stomach. The fish were laid out in boxes or on boards. Sardines and ice pink snapper, piles of prawns with heads and legs still attached, silver fish with long noses, and thick, dark-scaled fish that looked like they had been transported not from the sea but prehistory. Behind the boxes, men jigsawed confidently into the solid fillets with knives like knitting needles, tossing the meat onto butcherpapered scales and the heads and fins into the boxes at their feet. I turned off into the next alley. The ouzo in my stomach had come awake. I did not know what I might see next—a box of organ meat, the ripe skin of a just plucked chicken in a bucket, bird toes splayed wide? A styrofoam cooler of hot roe, its sides splashed up with old blood waves? For all I knew, the abbatoir could be just around the next booth.

Where was the nearest taverna? The edge of vision in my right eye curved, a ripple went through it, and a dark smudge pulsed for a second and went away.

I walked down the rampant descent back to the harbor. The lonely owners of the shops watched me pass, the whirl of small fans stirring the heat. No one went into the travel agency, where a dark man sat below a single map of Crete, at a desk in the room's single chair, an untouched spinner of postcards on his stoop like every other, stone penises and Suzy Quattro hair. No one in the bead shop, or the replica antiquities shop, or the shop that sold postcards and nothing else. I was alone, no other people came alone down this way. It was an obvious road—I had not stepped into some hidden passage to find it. It was the road parallel the bazaar. The road that led to the harbor and the lake and the bridge and the center of everything. I breathed differently there as I walked, the only one on the street, suddenly struck by the flutter in my vision, the only one breathing the smell of dried yellow grass in the pavement cracks. The only one making footsteps or sound. I did not look in any more of the open doors.

At the next intersection, in the distance, the next road over, was the bazaar. A woman stood by a white van with her back to me, one hand on her hip and with the other to her mouth. It was the beautiful woman in the black shirt. She turned, her hand moving away from her face, the cigarette there in her red-nailed fingertips, and she exhaled into the gold setting sunlight. She was talking to herself. She moved her hands to explain. But I could only hear my own footsteps clap and echo on the canyon of buildings around me.

A black-robed man with a black box hat and a shovelblade of gray beard stepped out of a door just ahead and I felt jogged awake, and he approached and never looked my way. I stepped in toward the building as he climbed past, and he pulled

something from under his apron and held it to his ear, and I watched as the Orthodox priest went up the slope and checked the messages on his cellular telephone. And then I heard my name.

I watched my steps as I walked. Alex is a common name, which I've learned from turning too often, too eagerly to face whomever has called me out from the crowd, only to see someone I do not know waving and instead looking happily past me at the Alex they meant to find. Then I heard it again, and it was right next to me, across the road, the voice of an Englishwoman. I did look up, saw a motherly blonde woman with a pretty smile that made lines around her eyes, and she smiled like the lines were something that had not worried her in a long time. It was Sharon Moulder. I went across the street, and she looked as pleased to see me as if I were her son.

Fancy seeing you here, she said.

I went to shake Sharon's hand and she held mine between hers.

We were just up the road at the museum, did you go?

The market, I said and the sound of words coming out of my own mouth surprised me. Had I spoken to anyone else today, anyone at all in days?

It would be trite of me to say it's a small world, would it not? she said.

Very small, I said.

Are you here alone? Sharon said.

I nodded. I'm just out to pick up some things so I won't have to go out tonight, I said and did not know why, wished the truth was not the last thing I ever thought of to say.

Not feeling well?

I touched under my eye. Probably just one too many late nights in a row, I said.

Sharon took my hand again. You should come eat with us, she said. Save your other things for tomorrow.

I did not remember a single conversation I had had with Sharon Moulder, if I had ever had one. We could not have spoken. I'd have remembered the kindness of her skyblue eyes, remember this calm, a feeling of safety mixed with the urgent need to confess every lie in my expansive story of lies. Sharon's hair had white flyaways woven in among the honey blonde, and I thought of the honey vendor and the odd phrase on his cart and said it to myself in my head—Honey of thyme. And then it was just the sounds and not the letters spelled out, and it was honey of time, honey of time, honey of time.

Sharon gestured to a vine-draped wall and the café sandwich board in front of it and said, Will you at least have a drink with us? Patrick and the girls went in already but I thought it was you coming down the road, so I waited.

I did not know what she could have thought of me. But I knew there is nothing worse in this world to have someone feel pity for you, that sometimes even a well-meant gesture can make one persona ascendant over another. I have asked for pity—it was what I must have wanted when I talked about Emma to everyone who would listen—and have felt the deep, satisfying resignation of letting myself sink. The release. The moment arriving at the end of a game in which you have badly lost. But for some reason I wanted Sharon to see me as yet undefeated, did not want her to think

I had given up. And because she did not know anything about me and Emma other than what she had seen at the Medusa, we were both now free to do and say anything in the universe. I said, I need food. Badly.

Sharon took my arm and we went toward a jungle of stalks and leaves that made an archway into the café. Sharon said, You've come to the right place.

I DINED WITH THE MOULDERS at Café Aouas, and again, as each and every time lately, when the food came I did not think I could be any more euphoric, and I wondered why I always thought I could go without eating, why I even forgot to eat. The menu was the same as the cafés by the lake, and the same bouzouki music thrummed along around us, and at first I thought it was sitting on the patio at Aouas that made it better, fully enveloped in walls of jasmine, cissus, cypress, and liana, and with slender trees sprouting up from between tables and the middles of tables, hung with carved gourds and laced with powder-yellow blooms and watery white Christmas lights. Friends at every table. And I thought that it was the company of the Moulders that made it better, strangers who had adopted me as their own, the way Americans do to foreigners they meet abroad. But the food was actually better. The two whole red mullet were perfect, fried crisp on the outside and flaking apart, and the rice was full of flavor, even mixed with frozen peas and carrots, and even the french fries were hot and good, and I ate them all.

As the sun outside our jungle faded and the Christmas lights twinkled like wine-drunk eyes, and the light from the television behind the bar made the leaves' shadows flash, I learned that Cara had just turned seventeen and was thinking about

schools, even in America, and that Nadine was a top-notch cellist, and that both of them thought they were going to fly out of their skin when they saw Gerald Coulthard at the hotel. I learned that Sharon had been a dancer, and she would not tell anything when the girls begged, but crossed her legs with a scissor-kick and grinned a little to show that it was true. And I learned that Patrick felt lucky, as he sat back and said nothing and drank retsina and ordered more and filled my glass and didn't even need to smile, content.

They asked me questions and I answered them. I told the girls I did not know Gerald before this trip, that I had never even thought of visiting Greece before, and that, yes, I did think that the dark-haired girl with Gerald was very striking, indeed. I told them that I was terrified of the way the taxis drivers drove, that I had seen a funeral a few days before, and that earlier that same day I had seen some men removing one of those shrines to the victims of the road just below the hotel. When Sharon asked I said I did not think I wanted to be a history teacher forever but did not know what else I should even be thinking I might do next, and that no little kid dreams of growing up to teach the history of death rituals or cemeteries, except maybe some sick fuck. The girls giggled, and I apologized for my language. And then I told Sharon that my mother had died of cancer, four years ago, and Emma and I had been together when she died, that there is no other time in your entire life like that, not ever. Patrick had heard this before, I realized as the words were coming out of my mouth, and his eyes cast down to a spot next to his chair on the floor. Sharon asked if everything wasn't going to be alright, and I told her I still did not know, but that now I knew Emma and I were not meant to be.

You can say that again, Cara Moulder said. At the pool the other day I thought she was going to wrestle you right into the pool, like something from television.

Now, now, Sharon said.

So why did you come to Crete, then? Cara said. You must have known things were going to be like this.

Nadine said, It's not as though she put a gun to your head.

Sharon shook her head at Nadine and Nadine pushed her fork through her pile of fries. I smiled at her and she smiled back at me and then her sister, two girls who'd never done anything wrong, who never had reason to be sad, two girls for whom the future was infinitely vast.

I said, What matters now is that I'm here. And no, you're right, there was no gun to the head, I said and suddenly I felt it, that now I would tell them a story to change the tone of things. And there was a story to tell, a story I always told. I said, Her husband did once, though.

She was married? Nadine said.

With a child, I said. Emma's son is with her mother back in London.

But what about the gun? Patrick said.

Sorry, I said and sat back. I shouldn't tell it—it's not dinner conversation, I said and was going to say something about it not being appropriate for young girls, but I left it at that. But the idea was planted in my head, and no matter what I was telling myself or them, I was going to end up telling it.

Oh, you must, you must! Cara said.

It's the wine, I said. My mouth is racing away from me, like it usually does. Am I going to remember this tomorrow? Are you all going to be laughing at me?

Sharon said, The girls have been around us long enough to know that there's nothing wrong with letting your hair down ever once in awhile.

If you're talking about dad last bank holiday, Nadine said, I'd hardly call that letting your hair down.

Understatement of the year, Cara said.

Girls, Patrick said and he extended his arms across the table and took each of them by the wrist, something he had done before. Both daughters did not look to where he held them but looked up to their father's soft face and his calm eyes, with the retsina working behind them, and his whole body moved when he breathed, and he blinked his slow tranquilizing eyelids, and the girls didn't have anything else to say. Patrick turned to me and cleared his throat. I think it's unanimous, he said. Good sir, your story please.

I've told it so many times, I said. I filled my tumbler of wine and drank. I lit a cigarette and began, So... the first time her husband caught us in bed together, we were watching a movie.

They gave me the look I wanted when I told the story, the reason for the line. The first time? asked their open mouths and eyes. I nodded. This was the reaction they were supposed to have, the hush as the curtains part. They were in and so was I.

In the story, Emma's husband came home one night from the air force base, where he was supposed to be staying, and found us lying on the bed in their bedroom watching a movie. We had on all of our clothes, and we were far apart, not touching. I maybe was still even wearing shoes. He asked what we were doing in a how's-it-going sort of way, like I was not in his dark bedroom on his bed alone with his wife, and I said we were watching a movie, and he went into the living room, and I held my head, and Emma stared at the duvet cover, and we heard the sounds of beer cans cracking. In the story, there were six cans in ten minutes, and then the slam of the front door, then his car door, the engine revving and peeling away. We waited in the dark, the movie still going but without sound and us not watching the screen. I asked Emma if I should leave, and she said, no, to stay, it would be alright. Then the car door again, the front door, and he was in the room with us, and he yelled at me to get the fuck out of his house. I stood up, he yelled at me, he stuck his hand up into the cupboard above the closet, under a stack of board games, in his hand he held a gun, and he pointed it at me. So the story goes. How does it feel to look down the barrel of a loaded forty-five, motherfucker? he said, and Emma was on her knees on the floor at the end of the bed, and she said—and when I told the story, I said it in her accent, and I got it—Oh, Rick, you're not going to shoot him. And then I reached for my clothes, a pinstriped blue suit for the next day on the closet door, and Rick looked at the suit, and I got my backpack off the floor, and as I stood up, out from the unzipped side of the backpack, a hairdryer tumbled out. The cord unspooled and the hairdryer hit the floor, and the gun dropped to Rick's side and Rick looked at the hairdryer. Yes, I used to use a hairdryer, and that was the point in the story where people laughed, and the

Moulders laughed, and by this point in the telling no one was wondering what I was doing with a married woman, anyway, or what she was doing with me, and everything was relieved in that simple comic act, the tragedy of the man slipping on a banana peel. Rick, in the story, did not say anything else, and Emma took his hand and he looked down to her, and I ran out the back door into January Idaho cold middle of the night and across a frost-heaved field and over a barbed wire fence and ripped my jeans and sat in my car and turned on the lights and it was so cold it took a full second for the lights to come on. And when whoever I was telling the story asked what came next, how did we possibly get out of it, I said that Emma just talked her way out of it, which was true, and I did not ever know what she said. I drove by her house four times, the last in morning twilight, and Rick's car was still there, and it was a long, long night, and then there were a couple of days of not knowing, and then I was back in her bed.

But even as I was telling the story, I was thinking of another one, some memory that came kicked out from under the stacks of other memories, stirred suddenly by my being here with her, or with the Moulders in all of their Englishness. Maybe just by the food. It was something I had forgotten about until just then.

ONCE

ONLY ONE TIME were we able to forget ourselves. A few years ago, on a trip to London, the first time I had ever been. Like Crete, she took me there, she paid. And like this time to Crete, her gift was a surprise. A Christmas present then. She was already going home for a month to see her family and she told me she wanted me there. But just for a week, she joked, knowing that I would have to come back early for the spring semester's early start, my last as a student.

It's not even a fair fight, I said and was joking, too. I get a week and your mother gets the next three to convince you to move back to England. You'll cave.

When she told me, we were in the break room of the department store on Boise's bench where we both worked. Where we met. We had not been careful. Not about how much time we spent together there, or the language of our bodies. Not about giving each other gifts that might need to be explained. I could not help myself and talked about her all the time, even around my mother, who had seen and heard the beautiful British woman when she shopped at the store and seemed to think of so much talk as the only vent for my hopeless crush. Our fellow employees looked at us or looked away from us in a way to let us know their suspicion, but we knew that people's nature anywhere was to talk most about what they did not know. And because the whispers were so often and so loud, we started playing the wrongfully accused, laughing that it would be quite brazen indeed to have a love affair in the

broad fluorescent light of a store full of people. Ha. Not exactly the romance you see in the movies. In the garden center, the toy department, in the apparel stockroom, and at the customer service desk, we spread the nasty rumor of our inner goodness. And in the strange way thoughts evolve, our saying so out loud, so often, made us almost believe that we weren't doing anything wrong.

But no matter the conditions, you do not spend Christmas together when your girlfriend is married. You do not celebrate beyond any single moment, nor toast tradition's onset. To mark an anniversary is to remind yourselves not how long you have been together, but how long you have been making secrets. How long you have gone on the promise that one day there will be no obstacles between you, that one day she will leave him. Until then, you are never home. You are in each other's cars in the middle of the night, in parking lots, in all-night diners' booths, on playground equipment in city parks. It puts you under lights that make you both look sick under the eyes, in stackable plastic chairs at a card table covered with supermarket tabloids, someone's single-serving cup of chili humming on the lit up stage of the microwave behind her. Next to you on the wall is an advertisement for shoes with non-slip soles. Your relationship is set in unglamorous locales, but any secret is its own universe, with its own rule set and you are learning them as you go, and the settings fade in your importance and what you must do to find any moment to be with one another. And so she gave me my Christmas gift, the plane ticket to England, in the break room a week after Halloween.

You know my mum likes you, Emma said. Much more than she likes Rick.

That's not what worries me, I said.

Emma waved me away. You'll see, she said. All it takes is about one minute to remember how depressing London is in the winter. It doesn't make much of a case for itself.

I can't wait, I said.

Neither can I, she said. Just then the cashier came back for her chili and Emma and I sat still and said nothing. In England we would be free from such silences, free from this room's flickering yellow spotlight. Across an ocean our secret was safe. Worry would not follow us to dinner, to the movies, to bed. It was hard to imagine. It made us both grin like what we were, which was just two people in love.

The cashier sat at another table and faced the smoke-gummed wall. Emma whispered to me, How will you tell people that you're going?

I'll just have to tell them, I said.

MY MOTHER CALLED home from work and pulled me as though by the chest from the deep well of a dream I would never remember. She sounded surprised when I answered, expecting the machine. She said she was going to leave a message for me to get a package of pork chops out of the freezer for dinner. It was a day when I had a morning class and nothing else.

No class today, I said, lying in bed, never having opened my eyes.

That's good, she said. You got home late last night.

My professor's at some conference, I said and could feel the lie taking shape. I went on, She canceled it the other day.

A whole day off, my mother said and there was silence on the line's other end, and I can only imagine that whatever she had been thinking had made her suddenly sad. I dipped backward into the pool of sleep.

You could come downtown for lunch, she said brightly, and I sat up, not awake, dehydrated, hoarse, gassy with booze, but years away from my first hangover. When you live at home through college, you live a sheltered life, but more, an unexamined one. It was true that the closet was full of clothes ironed by my mother, that the sheets were changed weekly, and that I was never expected to fend for myself when it came to food. But as I think of it now, I realize how much I would not have seen that morning, how much everything around me was old culture growth, from high school or earlier. It seemed perfectly normal to have the same posters on the wall as I'd had for years, a sack of Legos under my bed. You just go on being whatever you were before. That I had a secret, older, married British girlfriend did not make me question any of it, and I still can't tell you why.

Sure, I could eat, I said. The alarm clock said ten-thirty. Impossible.

In an hour or so? said my mother. In front of my building?

Sure. Bye.

Don't forget the pork chops, she said.

Of course, I said and closed my eyes, and didn't remember the pork chops until I was already showered, dressed, and ten miles down the road.

For the first time in four years, the entire time I'd been going to college, my mother had been declared medically cancer-free. She never believed herself to be a

cancer patient, even through full courses of radiation and chemotherapy—one stint required her wearing a device for six weeks at a time that slowly released the medicine into her bloodstream through a catheter implanted under her skin, and another meant two months in the hospital after high-dose chemo, where she was so susceptible to anything from the outside world she could not eat raw vegetables or even pancake syrup that hadn't been heated to one-hundred-and-forty degrees. Unless she was literally receiving treatment, she continued to go the gym, never missed any work, still made dinner for the increasingly absent family almost every night.

A month earlier, after the all-clear diagnosis, she'd gone to Las Vegas with her girlfriends, a once-a-year get-together the group had made happen since high school. My sister was backpacking through Europe, which left only me and my father in the house.

All I can present is one example of circumstantial evidence and one incident. First, the appearance of not one but two cologne bottles on my parents' bathroom countertop, when there had not been any in twenty years. Then, on the second night of my mother's absence, I arrived home at my usual hour to find the house empty. I sat up, waited. When I finally heard the garage door opener, I made way to the kitchen under the pretense of finding a midnight snack. My father came in from the garage, his eyebrows lifting in panic, wearing a shirt with a flash of unfatherly sheen, tucked in no less, and didn't need to say anything. I had him, stinking of cologne and wrongdoing, and he knew it. It was in that moment that I came to understand more about adulthood than I had learned through the whole of the rest of my life, and it was this: growing up didn't have anything to do with maturity or making better choices. It

was no surprise to me that three days later, on the day my mother returned from Las Vegas, that my father announced he was leaving. He said in a voice that cracked for the first time I had ever heard, I just don't feel like this is my home, and if I hadn't known better, I'd have found it sincere. But that time was past. He was just a lying fuck like me.

My mother took it well. Better than I or my father had expected, apparently. I was ready to rat him out, embellish the details if I got a good rant going, but didn't need to. My mother started shopping for houses. She decided to go back to school, to study history, which makes me both smile and feel sick in my heart as I write it. She had beaten cancer, and she wasn't going to let my father interrupt her life's next great phase. For good measure, she ran her own investigation and by simply calling around discovered the other woman, then called her at home, just to let her know that no one was getting away with anything.

When Emma had wondered how I was going to tell everyone I was going to England, what Emma meant was, How are you going to tell your mother about me? It was a complicated moment. To acknowledge my relationship with a married woman seemed to me to put me in league with my father as men disrespecting the sanctity of marriage. But Emma had always wanted me to tell my mother. It was irrational, helped nothing, and she knew it. That didn't matter. It mattered to her that, at least in regard to my mother—and damn the consequences—Emma was not a secret. And the plane tickets had arrived, we were going.

My mother and I met in front of her office building, she wearing tennis shoes instead of the heels required when she was at her desk on the twelfth floor, and we

walked a couple of blocks to a busy bistro for lunch, a place where I liked the fish and chips. We sat on our coats on stools at a high pub table at the noisy room's window, white winter city light glowing cold on us, mother and son, the last such time I can remember. My mother had been very beautiful, something I can say with some objectivity and can verify through photographs, but growing up I had only ever thought of her as my mother. Her hair had grown back since chemotherapy, but natural curls had replaced the ironing-board straight hair she'd had battled with perms throughout my whole life, and now she let the silver coils show through, as though allowing the idea of becoming older. And years of chemical treatment had vaporized the cartilage in her ears and nose, which now sported a bump in the middle and another at the end, and she'd sometimes rub her nose to show you it was like a Halloween prosthetic, something you could squish and would spring back, and she'd laugh because having a new nose wasn't even a bother. Her smile stayed the same, and so did her eyes when she smiled, the same as in her senior portrait, and people say I have her eyes, which I know is meant to be a nice thing to say, but I have no answer to it, nothing to say to fill that next empty space.

The worst thing in the years after someone dies—when you have gone back to reading the sports page, becoming angry at the price of gasoline, daydreaming about vacation someplace warm; when grief surprises you instead of hanging before your eyes like a lens through which you view every moment—is that you forget not just what they said but what they sounded like. I can remember some things from across the years, nothing connected to anything else—her yelling out from the kitchen an incorrect answer to a question on Jeopardy!, or singing in imitation of her own mother

twenty years before, You get to vacuum! These are the things I would make myself remember, like opening up the most shameful pages of a diary, basking in the sting, knowing that to feel something, anything, was important. But as you promote some things in memory, most others do fall away. The awful truth is that sometimes I simply could not make myself pay attention to anyone, even and especially my mother, and I often found myself nodding along and moving through whole conversations without absorbing anything, bobbing through a fog of my own self-reference. At least that day I had an excuse, singularly poised to unleash me and Emma's story when any reasonable moment cracked open. We ate, I nodded, and my mother said I was acting weird. So true. I waited, waited, the bill came, and every second I promised myself I would just do it, just fucking tell her the truth, that second elapsed without ceremony. In the end, I completely lost my nerve. She paid, like always. There was never any question. We stood and were moving back toward our respective paths, she thinking of work, and me of, who knows, going back to bed, buying something at the record store, how long until I could smoke a cigarette.

Then, at the corner outside, as she was going one way and I was going another, I reached out and hugged her. I let go and looked at her eyes, which were my eyes.

There's something that's come of what's going on with you and dad, I said and was already a mile into a brand new lie.

She crossed her arms.

I told her that I had been upset at work a few weeks ago and that Emma had noticed. As my story went, when I told her that my mother and father seemed headed for divorce, Emma revealed her own situation, that she and her husband were

separated, and he'd put in a request to be stationed in Reykjavik. I couldn't tell the whole truth, that she'd been cheating on her husband with me for two-and-a-half years. I felt then that my having a married girlfriend would have been something that would have hurt my mother to know. I was careful not to make too many outright lies, and the situation's core was true. But I think now that what hurt her is that I kept anything from her, that it hurt that I failed to understand she was the one person in the universe who would accept me no matter what I'd thought or done.

My mother literally tapped her foot, the most intimidating a white Reebok has ever been. She said, Did you kiss the British babe?

I grinned.

Well, be careful, said my mother. We know she's fertile.

ENGLAND. We arrived on New Year's Eve, and were so tired that Heathrow was a flash of blue and purple carpet, the tube a vessel from science fiction, and the darkening scenery that passed by us on the overground train would not imprint itself into memory, no matter how I tried. No matter how I told myself it wasn't Baltimore or Seattle or Atlanta. That this was my first time on foreign soil.

We sat at the kitchen table in Emma's mother's house while the new year approached in the form of warm radio static on the BBC, Emma's son asleep upstairs in the room that had been hers a lifetime ago. Although we said we were not, Emma's mother Jane was sure we must be starving and set to work making prawn curry. Emma had done as good a job as anyone to set up the scene in which I now sat, which

is not much, and it occurs to me only now that she must have seen that home through the same forgiving lens of normalcy with which I viewed my closet full of ironed shirts and Legos under my bed in my parents' house. But there was this difference—Jane and her common-law husband Paul owned a pet store in Potters Bar, and their home fed the business as sometime pet hospital, boarding house, and full-time breeding operation. At the time of our visit, there may have been a hundred animals on the premises—a shed out back with hamsters, gerbils, long-tailed Russian mice, birds as big as your thumb and others that would make you reconsider the imperative of your to-do list if you came across them on the street, dozens of guinea pigs in hutches, bunnies in crates. Another whole pen outside was for fifteen cats, known as the cattery, and inside, in a soundless white glassed-in room was another more elite cadre of cats with long, silver-blue fur. Next to me at the table, less-organized, were pet carriers of more visiting guinea pigs and cats, and, loose, thumping its hind leg and dribbling urine on the hardwood, was the biggest goddamned rabbit I've ever seen. The place was remarkably clean, and I suppose the business depended on that, but there was no escaping the pet store smell of ammonia and sawdust, and the sound of scurrying, squawking, scratching, and sucking at the little water bottles bubbling in every cage all became a kind of sonic wallpaper.

Jane was pretty but a little too made up, a being from the universe of what Emma might one day become if she continued to think with exclusive fondness for times past. I had met her when she'd visited Emma in America, introduced as Emma's boyfriend, and although she did not regard me seriously because of my age and perhaps Emma's situation, she was warm to me immediately. Now, as she

counted the cardamoms into a pan of simmering coconut milk, she asked me about school, and when I told her I was teaching as a graduate assistant next semester, and that it was a class about the history of one of Boise's cemeteries, she lit up.

Emma, you should take Alex out to Highgate to see Karl Marx, she said.

My mum, the socialist, Emma said.

My darling Labour Party may finally have a chance this time, Jane said.

Paul sat down at the table with a white guinea pig in his lap whose tangled ribbons of hair were so long you could have reasonably mistaken the creature for lady's winter accessory or a mitt to wash your car, until Paul flipped it over to reveal four spiny feet and a chattering hole where the mouth seemed to be. This was my first time meeting Paul, who'd moved in when Emma was fourteen, six months after her parents' divorce, and managed to step delicately enough through Emma and her sister's teen years—they overlooking his proclivity to morning exercises in a kimono and the unsavory hobby of mating hamsters—to earn grudging support and now a kind of secondary love. As Emma had advertised, Paul was a bit rabbity himself, tall and stereotypically English pale, spectacled and sweet-seeming, a man who'd lived a long time in a house beyond the fathom of his control. He and Jane had met doing community theater, as the lead roles in Harold Pynter's *Betrayal*, a coincidence too astute for anyone to even mention—Jane had cheated on her husband, Emma's father, with Paul, only after Emma's father had cheated on her. Now Paul began clipping the guinea pig's sharp yellow toenails, every one eliciting a babylike scream, as though he were snipping nerve endings.

Paul asked me if I was going to teach when I got my master's degree, and I told him I had no idea what else I was going to do. I've been going to school for so long it's hard to imagine ever being out of it, I said.

I got my degree, he laughed. The animals rarely even acknowledge it. To the guinea pig, Paul said, If I weren't a bigger person, it might hurt my feelings.

In what? I said. Your degree.

Design, he said.

I said that even if I wasn't ever going to use my degree, I wished it was in something interesting, something creative, where I could get nostalgic and get out the old sketches and tinker with ideas I hadn't thought about for years. Now you've done it, Emma said, and I had. Paul pushed the guinea pig across the hardwood and raced up the tall stairs, Emma and her mother shared a silent conversation they mouthed to each other theatrically but was clearly meant for me to ignore, and I thumbed through Paul's record collection on the radio cart behind me. Paul came back with his portfolio, set it down in front of himself, and had his palm flat against the inside cover but stopped before he turned it over.

I just realized, he said. It's New Year's Eve and none of us have had a thing to drink.

We're alright, Paul, Emma said.

You alright, Alex? Paul said.

I looked at Emma.

She said, Go right ahead. If I had so much as a sip I'd pass out I'm so bloody tired.

A beer then? Paul said happily.

Whatever you're having, I said.

Paul and I drank a French beer called Biere D'Or in little eight-ounce bottles and looked through his portfolio. I liked Paul. Was happy for him that he'd made it to this point in love that he could be settled. The way he looked through his past was not with regret but with an original eagerness. He had painted and drawn, but mostly built furniture, showcased here in utile, diagrammed photographs, and particularly interesting was a kind of transforming chair that looked as flat as a graduation mortarboard but when you sat in it, the corners curled in to make a back and armrests, a design for which he'd won a thousand pounds in a contest. Paul admired the empty bottle of his third petite golden beer, and Emma finally said, Damn you all, and pulled a beer of her own from the cardboard flat at our feet—which Paul had brought in wholesale from the hamster shed when it was clear I was up for it—and she cracked it open. Jane set what appeared to be a serving bowl of herbaceous Thai curry in front of me and another huge bowl before Emma, and I was so glad she'd not believed us about being hungry. She sat down and looked at our drinks, wondered if we hadn't conspired to leave her out, and said she'd better have a martini. I swung around to the liquor cabinet, the bottles glowing in the light of the cat incubation center behind it, and offered to make a martini for her, feeling some boozy warmth myself. I asked her what kind of gin, and she said, Goodness no, just a bit of fizzy lemonade, and she poured herself a glass of vermouth and citrus soda pop.

Welcome to England, Alex, Paul said and we tapped beers. On the radio, someone said some people had frozen to death in Trafalgar Square. It may have been the new year. Before bed I called home and spoke to my mother, wishing her a happy new year even though for her it was still hours away, and I'll never remember what else we talked about, but it's a call I'm glad I made.

Emma and I slept that night and every other night we stayed there in the third-story loft, Emma's sister's old room, still decorated with the anthropology books on cinder-block bookcases from her first year of college. In the corner, a pile of handbags, some alien metallic garment tossed over a Japanese screen. A pair of turquoise high-heeled shoes held the door open, and we could hear Emma's son's breathing from his room below us. We stared out the sloped loft windows to a starless London sky, and all there was to see was our own reflections and that of the glowing paper lantern between us and the window. I smiled at us, at Emma next to me in bed in England. I was too drunk to be thinking of that moment's rarity, our complete and sanctioned freedom to be together. I was drunk and incapable of much, but I rolled over and gave it a try.

She kissed back a little and looked out the window again.

You're already thinking about moving back, I said. You're already caving in to your mother.

Emma turned to me, then, as though finally hearing what I'd said, replied, Huh? No, that's not it at all. Now Emma whispered, My mum has a new boyfriend, top secret.

Shit, I said.

I know, she said.

Emma and I did make love on that unfolded futon that night. Welcome to England.

NEW YEAR'S DAY NIGHT Emma and I went to dinner with her sister Kristiane and Kristiane's boyfriend Felix. I'd met Kristiane at the same time as I met Emma's mother, and knew from that interaction that Kristiane thought very little of me, agreeing with their mother that I was probably too young, even though she was the same age as me. But more clear to me was that Kristiane did not think I was cool enough, for her sister to have as a boyfriend or for herself to be seen with, and she looked like a character from a Japanese cartoon as she walked around Boise, Idaho in her London clubwear. Felix I did not know, but I felt good after my first interaction with Paul, and ready to be as deadly self-deprecating, un-clingy, and cool as I needed to be when we met them at the Indian restaurant around the corner. But I was disheartened to discover that, like Kristiane, Felix had a nearly impenetrable accent, and in just the short moment from when we met under the yellow streetlight outside to when we stepped from the drastic, hacking wet cold into the warm, curried fluorescent-lit room inside, I realized I was going to have a lot less in common with a half-black DJ in a tracksuit than I had with a man who killed time mating hamsters. We shivered for a moment just inside the door.

Do you have a very hard time understanding what I'm saying? Kristiane said, every word intentional, as though I was retarded.

I'm adjusting to England, I said. Emma's is the only accent I really know.

It's more a London fmg than an England fmg, Felix said, and perhaps recognizing my confusion, he explained, Like how I say my th's as f's. Like, it's a fumb. He held up his thumb and I nodded.

The Bekash was in a strip of shops that curved up the knoll, like every strip I would come to see in North London. I didn't care that we were sitting on office furniture, which Emma pointed out as we settled in under a carved archway, a generic print of Ganesh on the wall. Nor that the Bekash seemed a little too clean to be authentic, as Felix mentioned. Nor did I mind the dreadful Indian music, to which Kristiane rolled her enormous blue eyes. She'd be the prettiest girl you had ever met if you didn't know Emma existed, but sitting right across from her now, Kristiane seemed a caricaturized version, with curlier lips, those huge baleful eyes, and with dark hair streaked automotive metallic maroon. Then she pulled off her leather jacket, and Emma's own eyes bugged and she made this sound: Whoof.

Oh, yeah, that, Kristiane said and looked down at herself.

Felix picked his teeth.

Dear goodness, Emma said.

It's something to get used to, I know, she said or something like that.

I fink I've gotten used to them, Felix said.

Emma stared at Kristiane's chest like a man stares, and I was left with no choice but to look myself. And, whoof.

How much did that cost you? said Emma, desperate, quaking like an overbred poodle.

Kristiane answered with something I missed, and Emma asked about the procedure, and I couldn't listen deep enough to get the answer on that either. But I caught this from Kristiane: she said, And there you go, a pair of tits.

We all shared our curries, passing them around in their elaborate but cheap tin serving boats. I'd asked Emma what to get, and she'd acted annoyed and said I should know what I like to eat, she couldn't tell me. But then I laughed and said I had no idea what I liked, and Felix laughed, too, and had Kristiane order for him, and I asked Emma to order for me. Fine, she said and Felix and I toasted with frozen pint glasses of Kingfisher Lager beer. Felix showed me how to eat curry in flatbread called naan.

Like a taco, he said and pronounced it tacko.

Terrific, I said and it was.

Emma talked to Kristiane and Felix throughout dinner, but with me she was quiet, something had changed. She knew how I felt about the mere idea of her getting breast augmentation, which was that it was fucking ridiculous. Emma was slinky, a waif, as near physically perfect a woman as I have ever seen. But childbirth had changed her, and returning to a flat ribcage was a constant source of panic, as though everyone saw her suddenly differently, that they knew some secret about her and lowered their voices every time she entered a room. That and a varicose vein on the

back of her right leg were the marks motherhood had left on her, and she wanted them erased. She threatened getting her tits done all the time—I phrase I hated—and she read medical textbooks about the varicose vein, learned that the procedure was to snip the ends and just whip it right out. You're beautiful, I would tell her. Don't change anything. But I honestly wouldn't have cared if she'd taken care of the vein, I was ambivalent. The other thing, though, I knew—you don't get new tits and keep the same boyfriend.

We walked back from the Bekash, silent, stomachs sore with Indian food. Our breath blasted out of our frozen nostrils. Emma walked two steps ahead of me, and I read her mind: Don't you try to stop me, she was thinking. And, I'm getting them. At Jane's front door, Emma swirled around the contents of her bag, and I touched her shoulder. She looked up at me, and I looked at her eyes, which were like ornaments, and she stared straight through me to the charmed fortunes of her buxom future. I opened my mouth, stopped, dropped my hand away from her, and she let it pass. I knew if I told her not to now, or even tried to pay a useless compliment, that she'd chuck me for sure. In England my vote was purely ceremonial.

WE DID NOT GO to Westminster Abbey, The British Museum, Wimbledon, nor to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels. We did not go to Highgate Cemetery. Too touristy, said Emma. We did go shopping in Central London a few times, for music for me and clothes for her and her son, and I even liked it. I was happy to be in a place I'd never been, riding the red buses through a thousand-year-old city, happy with the grime of it, the greasy tunnels of the subway, the fish-belly white

faces of everyone trudging through the gloom. Happy with newsagents, greengrocers, off-licenses, taxi ranks, driving on the wrong side of the road, roundabouts, fifteen different kinds of fried fish at every fish and chips shop, everything that Emma thought nothing of.

Emma was steadily deadening herself to me. At first she seemed outright embarrassed at the way I spoke, walked, moved, thought, breathed. But over the week she noticed me less and less, and once when I nearly stepped in front of a careening taxi in Piccadilly Circus, she only said, You're supposed to look the other way.

We ate dinner at a French restaurant called Le Papillion, where the old man who waited on us said, Thank you very much, every time he brought us a plate of food or topped off our wine. Here is your plate of snails, thank you very much. May I take this saucer? Thank you very much. I ordered duck and Emma had skate wing, but we were the only people in the restaurant and we were sitting by the front window and the chef and the old waiter wanted us to stay, and so kept bringing plates of mussels in saffron cream, tourneed potatoes, haricot verts, pates of pork butt and pistachio. Mushroom tart, thank you very much. I remembered the names because of the presentation, and because the plates kept coming and coming. We drank cognac, then had another glass of Bordeaux to go with a chocolate torte. Off my list of things to taste, check, check, check, as I surveyed the dishes on the battlefield. Emma set a tiny piece baguette spread with pate on her tongue and chewed, staring out the window to the dark and empty Barnet street. She glared at the old waiter as he bussed the table and thanked us very much. I bloody hate how he does that, she said when we were out the door, headed home instead of to the pub she promised earlier in the day.

I knew that part of it was intentional and part was the influence of her mother and the way Emma simply absorbed being home, and for all of that I was ready. She'd been homesick before, told me it was the last place she'd ever felt safe, and we had gone through weeks where she tried to forget about me so it would be easier for her to leave. It wasn't fun, but sounds worse than it was. I could suffer those chilly times, as they were always followed by a thaw. It was different this time because it was her first return to London since she met me, and me and the city were pitted somewhat unknowingly in competition, representing for Emma a whole galaxy of emotions each. But I felt that if I went and proved both my uninterrupted love for her and ability to be with her in her home city, that she need not choose at all, in the end she'd give herself over to me like never before.

What I had not expected was that London did not make her happy. Here she did not walk like herself, head back and chest out, like a model stomping down the runway, and she almost never smiled. You could see it on her, that she found herself suddenly ordinary. To balance the mood was precarious, me acting both like nothing was wrong and with the continued concern for her well-being and somewhat fawning attention that was a hallmark of our relationship. That and never showing desperation for the unthinkable but real possibility that she might never come back to America, a fear that crazed me in weaker moments, which were many. The truth is that I wasn't any better behaved for all my emotional fortification, and I looked longingly at her like someone she'd never known, staring at us in the reflections of subway windows—sitting next to each other only because there were no other open spaces. When she caught me I acted like I'd been reading the tube map, then the adverts. In one ad for

deodorant, a black-and-white of a woman's underarm, and the slogan, Nice Pits. Emma read the sign and pulled her pea coat closed over her chest.

It was only a week, I told myself, and allowed myself no preferences or opinions, agreed with everything, smiled as often as I remembered to. In the morning we had Earl Grey and toast with marmalade, helped Jane out with the animals—me filling the hundred odd water bottles, Emma brushing out cages and pressing little blue pills into patties of cooked beef for the indoor cat royalty. We went out in the daytime on whatever errand Emma could conjure, and we were back home at night, which kept our opportunity for conflict small. The sun was down by four in the afternoon.

Late at night we watched television in the dark with Jane and Paul, who agreed wholeheartedly with Emma as to the excellence of British television. Jane and Paul for years had laid stretched out on their own sofas in robes, having dinner out of those massive ceramic bowls and falling asleep, six feet away from each other, on the opposite sides of an aisle they no longer noticed, crossed only by the loose cats and menacing gigantic hare. But me and Emma's presence meant them sitting together on one couch and us on the other, upright, the ladies each one cushion closer to the screen. One night we had Chinese takeaway and watched four game shows and an American sitcom from the previous year. Kristiane and Felix came over and we played Trivial Pursuit, Emma reluctantly pressed into service on my team, saying it was unfair to play British Trivial Pursuit with an American, and she didn't mean unfair to me. She sat next to me with tangled hair wet from the bath and no makeup and wearing an ugly piece of gray underwear she'd bought earlier that day to keep me from getting any ideas, like a baby's singlet. Felix said, Mate, you've got nuffing to

worry about. But I surprised them. I knew more worthless trivia than anyone might have thought, and me and Emma won handily. I was feeling good until I went out back to smoke with Felix, and, without prompt, he said, You know, mate, she's done this wif every man she's ever brought round.

Done what? I said, but already knew.

Felix chuckled and wagged his chin. Alright, then, he said. Alright.

The next night on the couch we had curry from the Bekash, eating straight out of the containers, which were not white folding cardboard boxes but looked like the aluminum pans for frozen lasagna in America. Paul apologized for not realizing Emma and I had eaten Indian food just two days before, but I said I didn't mind at all, I loved Indian food, and when was I ever going to eat like this at home.

On television there was a commercial for hair tonic, with a woman getting off a trolley, and the placard said Barnet, the name of the part of London we were in.

Quite clever, that, Paul said. He told me about some of the old cockney rhyming slang, how Barnet fare was slang for hair, and how apples and pears was slang for stairs, but it'd gotten even more twisted and shortened. Now they'd just say they went up the apples, Paul said.

Emma and Jane looked across the room to each other, and Jane's eyes spun to the back of her head.

Then Paul hissed like a rat.

There's bloody raisins in this, he said and dragged his fork through the pile of rice. And bananas, he said as though someone had just run over his childhood dog.

I offered to trade Paul my tikka masala, but he said no, defeated, and I was secretly glad he'd declined. We all sat in the dark and ate. There was nothing on television that night, we ended up watching British celebrity news, and I said something to Emma about how I didn't understand why she and Kristiane hated certain celebrities and not others, that they seemed equally empty to me. And Emma half-turned but did not look at me, and all she said was, So irritating, and we went back to people moving through crowds of paparazzi, as we shoveled food into our mouths from tins.

It was a low moment, and it may have only been that I was stung and looking at anything but Emma that I saw what took place on the other side of the room, when Jane lay her head on Paul's leg, illuminated for only a second as a beach lit up the television. At first Paul didn't seem to know what to do, as though a tarantula had dropped off the ceiling and landed in his lap. The initial terror froze him solid. Then his eyelids lowered, the television flashing on his glasses, and I imagine all his senses closed so he could process this new, raw emotional data, the strange and familiar head and its hair come to rest on his kimono. Before he was aware of himself again, a primordial whim lifted his hand and spread his fingers on Jane's robed hip. Emma was watching the screen, a panel discussion on the future of the monarchy. Across the dark aisle, Jane made no overt glance of recognition, did not look at him and smile as old lovers do when they reconnect, as portrayed in soft focus and light the color of honey. But eventually her own arm dropped off the edge of the couch and her hand closed around Paul's bare ankle. I wanted to stand up and cheer.

On our couch, there were no errors in the takeaway order to force such luck. Paul had stocked up on the French beer, and I had one after another and kept the bottles collected around the leg of the couch to keep track. But I didn't try to keep track. Everyone went to bed, and I watched a documentary about Coca-Cola and Pepsi taking over the world and was buzzed and experiencing such clarity as to know its absolute truth. I could see everything around me sharper than ever. That table, that lamp, the strength of my own hand. Could look right into the eye of that big rabbit and see the evil in its heart. Knew what would come of me and Emma. The future's road opened up before me into a wide black ribbon.

That night in the loft I whispered to Emma, Everything's okay. I said, I know that you love me. She pretended to be asleep.

TWO DAYS LEFT, and after we'd tended to the animals Emma said it was about time she showed me something other than North London. She'd have her mother babysit. I told her not to worry, that I was having a good time. Rubbish, she said and before I knew it we were stepping off a rolling double-decker at Covent Garden.

She took me to the British Transport Museum, which had that smell of old trains that we both loved, and she took me to the four-story Dr. Martens store and bought me a pair of shoes, paid extra to ship them home to me. For lunch we had jacket potatoes from the galleria—baked potatoes as big as a loaf of bread, topped with such oddities as tuna salad, creamed corn, snap peas, and curried shrimp. I went for bacon and scallion, and she had buffalo mozzarella, basil, and cherry tomato. We sat on the curb in the dank afternoon cold and watched a man painted silver from head

to toe do robot moves for a giggling audience. I pointed out a note on the bottom of the menu behind us. The potatoes were from Idaho. We laughed. At first I'd bristled, as her unexpected effort with me could only have come from her own guilt, but with two-pound Idaho potatoes in our bellies we went for a walk in the park, and I felt that perhaps I'd finally made it through. At the park's exit was an aviary, and we passed one cage full of North American magpies. I said I thought it was silly to put something so common in a zoo, and Emma said that what was ordinary in one place could be exotic elsewhere.

Some things just don't translate directly, Emma said.

Like celebrity, I said, and although she didn't exactly laugh, you couldn't deny its presence—her first smile in a week. If it was duty to me, I didn't mind. Duty at least meant she still thought of me as connected to her, and that I was even thinking in that way lets you know just how fragile our relationship had become, although I would not have admitted that to myself or anyone. But now, after a pint of hard cider at the pub, I breathed, I held her hand, and we were on our way to being ourselves again.

She said she needed to do a bit of shopping and did I mind? Of course not. I still had souvenirs to buy for people at home, books and postcards I'd mail tomorrow but would surely beat back to the states. Maybe buy something for me. I left her sifting through a pile of a thousand pairs of ladies' underwear with five other women, and ventured on down the street on my own. In one store I turned over the price tag on a sweater and nearly laughed aloud, and in another the clerk stopped from yanking the trousers off a mannequin to stare me down, recording every American tic of movement, and just to prove I belonged there I snapped up a shirt from the clearance

rack and brought it to the counter. The clerk was not impressed. Outside I did the math and figured out that the shirt had just cost me ninety-five dollars. But what the hell.

I found Emma in the next store over from where I'd left her, and she was trying on shoes. She was modeling in the footmirror a pair that looked exactly like six other pairs of shoes I knew her to own, none, apparently that she'd brought with her. She said she needed them for the party she was taking me to tomorrow night, my last night.

What party? I said.

Just a thing, a birthday party for a friend from school, Emma said. It's at a bar.

Then I definitely want to go, I said.

You like these? she said and swiveled her foot for me.

If you don't get them, it'll be a tragedy, I said.

I carried the shoebox under my arm for her, and instead of finding our way back to the tube, we stayed aboveground and walked the darkened, winding streets of her city, scarves thrown over our shoulders, walking into our frozen breath, like something either of us might have imagined we would someday do together.

Suddenly she took my arm and steered me toward a grubby, bearded man standing over a tin cauldron. She said she bet I'd never had roasted chestnuts before, and I wanted to ask why she would suddenly indulge such a touristy whim for me, wanted to gush with the unbelievability of it, that this man in his fingerless gloves and the tiny coals in the night like dark hearts was himself my entire notion of London personified,

but instead I said only no, it was true, I had not ever had a roasted chestnut. She gave the man 50p and he handed her a hot paper packet, said, There you go, love, and she passed it to me.

We went on and when they'd cooled enough to eat, I gave it a try, and it was impossible to hide my disappointment.

Terrible, aren't they, she said.

I nodded and spit it out on the street and we laughed. She took the envelope of chestnuts from me and gave them to a homeless man passing out free newspapers, and we walked on.

Buoyed stupidly, I said, You sure you want me to go to that thing with you tomorrow?

You act like this and you'll talk your way right out of it, she said and I knew she was less than half-joking.

Next we went Trafalgar Square, to the National Gallery. But we were no good at the art museum together, didn't like any of the same things. On our way out of the labyrinth, I spun around at the last second, and there was Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. That night we went to a Russian bar with a hundred different kinds of vodka, where I talked with the bartender for a long time about nothing I can remember. The end of a good day.

BEFORE WE WENT TO THE PARTY, everyone was getting together for dinner at the Thai place next door to the Bekash. It turns out that what people do in England,

despite the culinary reputation, is eat. All the time. Emma was getting ready in the second-story loo, as I'd come to call it with the rest of them, and I snuck down the apples past her and the sound of water lapping against the sides of the tub to the kitchen to borrow one of Paul's records. I was surprised to find Paul himself there at the table with a highball glass in his hand, and it took me too long to realize that he'd been crying, and then I was staring at him and he looked up at me and actually sniffled.

You alright, Alex? he said.

I was just coming to borrow some Elvis Costello, I said.

He turned around to find it, and I heard Jane coming in from the cattery, cooing goodbye to her pretties.

Alright, Alex? she said and she brushed some straw from her chest and smiled.

Just fine, I said.

Good. Just fine, she said. Paul stared into his drink, and I ran out of there.

Upstairs in the loft Emma already had some music going, a low drone and a drubbing beat with a soulful black man chanting. She saw the record in my hand, and we exchanged a look but needed no words. I propped Elvis Costello against the wall. I was ready to go. I lay on the futon and she nodded along to the music, her shoulders back, checking herself in the mirror. The music was terrible, didn't even sound like anything.

I put my hands behind my head and looked past the paper lantern and my reflection, which looked good to me now, into the black sky. I think something's going on with your mum and Paul, I said.

Huh, Emma said, a word she'd never said since I'd known her. Now the music had added a disco guitar. Then Emma gasped. I sat up fast.

What is it?

Oh my God this simply cannot be! she said.

What, I said and went to her, clasped her urgent shoulders.

She held up her shoe, one of the ones she'd bought the day before. She started to cry. She nearly whimpered, It's a size three!

For once in my life I did the right thing, which was not to laugh.

A fucking size three! Emma said and threw it across the room, punching a hole through the Japanese screen. Her body jackknifed, and I was glad she didn't have anything else to throw, because now she turned on me, fangs bared. There's nothing I can do now! I can't bloody well go all the way into London now, without any shoes!

Because of what came next, I know now that I was in love with her then. Instead of telling her it was no big deal—which it wasn't, let's be serious—I told her that I would call Kristiane and have her bring some shoes. And it was sincere, not placating, not just something to say to get from this moment to the next. I had offered something simple and obvious but something which Emma was incapable of seeing, as frighteningly feral as she'd suddenly gone. It was not what Emma expected. She collapsed upon me, sobbing, and I held onto her.

I'm such a dreadful bitch, she said. Why can't I be nice to you once, ever?

No, I said. No. Don't say such a thing.

She managed to put herself back together and wipe away the rivers of errant mascara and called Kristiane herself, which was a good thing—there was no way I could navigate the British telephone service. She put herself back together—I'm afraid I shall have to go to the party looking like Alice Cooper, she said, and I said, No, no, you're beautiful, and I meant it, but that did not matter, it was that she needed to hear it. Emma and I waited in the living room and Paul and Jane took Emma's son ahead to the restaurant. Finally Kristiane and Felix arrived, and she dangled before us a pair of faux-leopard clogs, which looked like nothing Emma would wear, but she was genuinely grateful as she slipped them on, and we all walked together to the restaurant.

Can you believe mum finally chucked Paul? Kristiane said to Emma.

What? I said. I hated the way Kristiane said finally. Right then I hated Kristiane.

Emma ignored my question. I said, When was this?

Yesterday, Kristiane said.

Did you know? I said to Emma.

She shrugged.

Kristiane said, And that she took him to see a play in the place where they first met. That takes balls.

Is that why you took me out yesterday? I said. To get me out of the house.

Don't talk nonsense, Emma said.

These girls gossip about everything like he's got no feelings, Felix said. I really like Paul.

I do, too, I said.

At dinner Paul's face confirmed the reports, but no one said anything about it. We were all gathered around one big table, me, Emma, her son, Kristiane, Felix, Jane, Paul, all of us pretending to not know that everything was going to be different. Dishes of food came around the table, pieces of squid and potstickers and vegetable rolls wrapped in rice paper, and every one of them I handed to Paul, and he looked at them as though he no longer recognized what food was for. Like I had handed him a piece of literature written in an ancient language. There must have been something different in the way I was looking at him, too, because now when he caught me looking his way, he shot the stare back, eyes bugged out, pissed off and hurt. There was nothing to say. In this moment, when I could have risen up and taken his side, become his friend, I pressed my leg against Emma's under the table. And she let me. Paul's doom did not necessarily translate to mine. After dinner, me and Emma and Kristiane and Felix waited outside the taxi rank, and Jane took Emma's son by the hand and Paul walked home behind them because, I suppose, he had never even considered when this wouldn't be his walk home.

Was Paul wondering what it was that had brought him to this point in life? Did he blame himself—think perhaps that if he'd spent less time mating hamsters and

more time devoted to Jane that she never would have looked elsewhere? More exercises in the morning? Or—less? Maybe it was the kimono. Paul could have been thinking any of these things. But I didn't really know Paul. For all I know, he could have felt some kind of relief, as though things coming to an end proved something he'd known in his heart and felt in his stomach since the beginning, since *Betrayal*. I wondered if it might not feel strangely good to have it end this way, have the whole thing come crashing down instead of having the distance harden between them over decades.

Perhaps Paul found himself closer to truth on this walk home, solitary among people he had never had a reason to mistrust, as we instead thought about getting drunk. He may have been coming to realize that nothing he did mattered. No matter how much he loved Jane or said so, it would never have been enough. It had nothing to do with him or his actions, or anyone's—the thought would of course surface, that there must be someone else—but that his entire existence with Jane was defined only by Jane's own imagination, what she thought of him and how he fit into the universe she made every day, and that she could turn away from him the same way you shake off a bad dream, telling yourself that it didn't really happen, defying your pumping heart and disowning the wet hair at your neck, until you make yourself believe that none of it was true.

WE TOOK A CAB through Camden and past the locks to the party, at a place called Barzaar. Inside on the main floor were few people, and we followed a trail of signs that led us upstairs and to the private event. There the dark room was full, and

Emma pulled out her fat wallet—a man’s wallet she always had full of cash—and gave me her handbag and jacket, and she said I should sit down. She went up to the carved dark wood bar.

I did not know anyone. Kristiane and Felix had people to talk to, and I was not among them. I found a curved booth in the back with only space for one person and sat there, brushing up against the other people, and they did not look at me. I set the handbag and the jacket behind the booth in a potted plant, and I kept my own wool coat on. I smoked, easing back into the velvet cushions. I smoked, and that meant I was doing something. I reached in between a conversation to tap my ash out, and then it looked like I belonged to them. A young man asked if he could have a cigarette and I gave one to him. Cheers, mate, he said and gave a drunken smile.

I got up from the booth after awhile, as Emma had not returned with anything for me to drink. I found her at the bar. She waved me over to her, smiling with pinched closed lips. She kissed me, her hands on both of my cheeks, and she pushed a shot of vodka into my mouth from hers with her tongue. It burned and I swallowed and we kissed again.

We sat at the bar and drank vodka on ice with sweet lime syrup, and it coated our empty insides. Quickly we became very drunk, and she did not pay attention to the other men, and we forgot to meet her friends. Men offered to buy her drinks, and she said no. Actually, I was just about to buy one for my boyfriend, she said to one man. She bought drinks and I bought drinks. I met the birthday girl, an American from Hawaii. I waved rather than cross the circle to shake her hand, and she imitated my wave and laughed. She was blonde and ordinary, although her name was Isis, and

she spoke with a manufactured British accent. Emma and I returned to the bar and laughed, and when I asked what the fuck was up with her making fun of my wave, Emma said not to worry, I was just as British as Isis was if I wanted to be. Felix and Kristiane found us and Felix and I talked for a long time about cultural differences and similarities, and I was finally inebriated enough to crack the code of communication. He said it was his dream to come to America and bring home big, brown paper sacks of shopping, and to get Chinese takeaway in those little white boxes shaped like pagodas. It was something he'd seen in a movie, he'd said, and I told him he could come stay with me anytime, and there was so much goodwill in the air that I did not feel the need to mention that I was still living with my parents. When he and Kristiane said it was time for them to go, she made me get up, said, Come on, give us a kiss, and planted a slobbery one on my cheek. Victory.

I'm so sorry that I've kept you prisoner in my mother's house, Emma said when we were alone again and had switched to beer. She was a little slurry.

It's what I wanted to do, I said.

Emma shook her head, swallowed a burp. No. It was a crap thing of me to do. Our first time ever when we can go out and do whatever we want, and I make you water the hamsters. We've had a whole week here, and I just realized that it's the first time when I felt like we weren't doing anything wrong.

It won't be the last time, I said.

Emma brightened, looked up at me with shimmery eyes. Precisely, she said.

When it was well past time for us to go, we did. I went to get her things from behind the booth. I found her jacket. Nothing else. I leaned over the boothback. I mauled the potted plant, shaking off the brown leaves. The soil got under my fingernails. The bag was gone. I went to Emma and helped her into her jacket, and I told her I could not find the bag. Emma asked the group at the table if they'd seen it, and they shrugged and did not look even to their own feet. Emma got to the ground and looked under the table. I crouched down next to her, my hand on the small of her back.

Emma went to the bartender and asked him if anyone had turned in the bag. He said no, and he took down her number. We were too drunk to do anything, couldn't explain what we meant to the people sitting in front of the potted plant, and they looked at us like we were suffering from head trauma. Emma had her wallet with her, so we were okay. We were leaving the private party when I remembered that my passport was in her bag. We walked down the stairs and Emma told me not to worry. We'd sort it out somehow. She kissed me and said, It appears you're going to have to stay with me here forever, poor sap. I was too euphoric that that she liked me again to gather that she might not be coming back to America, so like herself to give me everything I wanted while taking it away at the same time. But I was drunk and she had her arms around me, and it was my last night in her country.

We waited for one man to get off the telephone when I noticed his girlfriend at his side. She had Emma's bag. I tapped her on the shoulder.

Excuse me, miss, I think you've got the wrong bag.

Sod off, she said and turned away.

No, seriously, I said. I'm sure that's my girlfriend's bag.

The man turned to me, still holding the telephone up and I could hear the warbled jumble of words come hollow from it. You heard her, he said. Piss off.

Emma came up behind me and whispered in my ear not to worry about it.

No, I said. That's not right.

The man hung up. He was shorter than me but his shoulders stretched wide in his leather jacket and his posture brought him forward. He looked at me.

I said, If it's hers, then my passport will be in the pocket.

The girlfriend rolled her eyes and lifted the bag to her chest, unzipping the side pocket. The man stared at me. He appeared to be made of some denser matter. His girlfriend pulled my passport out of the pocket. Oh, sorry, she said. David, what the fuck did you do with my bag?

I smiled at them, turned to Emma. I caught her in a long yawn, her eyebrows high arcs, eyelids sleepy and smoky and shuttering closed. It was a stupid thing, but I had always found her attractive when she yawned, the way her whole face and body spoke about her tiredness, and how I liked her best when she could be like this, so comfortable with me as to not worry, and then I did not worry, the promise of one night's end leading into another day. She had a piece of white chewing gum in her mouth.

And the next thing, I was on the floor. Emma gasped. My face pulsed and it felt as though each individual tooth on the left side of my mouth was a ringing bell.

Aren't you clever, the man said. He stood over me with his fist still tight, a larger fist than I would have imagined he'd have. If I'd imagined it. If I'd seen it coming. My hand had gone to my face and felt something slick and oily and I pulled it away and saw red.

The man yanked the bag from his girlfriend and flung it to the floor beside me. I lay back. My head rolled to one side on the floor.

Emma telephoned a taxi, and we rode in the back. I lay my head on her lap, and Emma held my pulled-off sweater to my nose and torn lip. She was wearing stockings with a garter belt and one clasp pressed into my neck from under her skirt. The air was rich with fried food, and Emma asked the cab driver what it was, and he said it was fried chicken, and both Emma's and my own stomach groaned, and we both said, Yum. You like some? the cab driver said, and we said no, that was so nice to offer but no, but instead of arguing with us, he passed back to Emma the whole paper sack of fried chicken and french fries. Thank you, Emma said desperately and shoved fries into her mouth. Thank you so much, she said, you're a lifesaver, and the cab driver waved to us in the mirror. Here, eat, you need to eat, she said to me and tore strips of the chicken from the bones and fed them to me on the right side of my mouth, trying not to touch my burst lip. She fed me the french fries one by one and pressed her fingers into my mouth and I tasted the salt, and my lips were burning now but it didn't matter, and we bounced around as the taxi rocketed through the narrow London streets, lights pulled out like hot taffy wires above me in the windows. I ate more, and we shared the dark of the cab, my head on her thighs, the clip of her garter belt like a wrench under my neck but I wasn't going to move.

Her hair floated over me, she cradled my face, and I could not see hers. But then she said, Why do you look so happy? and she was in love.

I kissed the salt from her fingertips. Because just this once, I said, I am.

CAFÉ AOUAS, CONTINUED

WHILE I REMEMBERED that first time in London and told the story of Emma's husband and the gun, Patrick, Sharon, Cara, and Nadine watched me talk. I had told the story many times. That was true. I did not need to hear myself to tell it, everything around me was slick with focus. I went through the procession of their moony eyes, shot through with wonder, the tiny lights in the vines reflected and slowly spinning in their eyes, heard how their breathing changed, waiting for the page to turn, and I won't pretend I did not love it. It must have been like that with Manolis in Finsbury Park, hypnotized by Bryan Adams in the rain, Bryan Adams knowing what he was doing to the spine of Manolis and all of the other Manolises of the world. But I'm not saying that my story is as good as Bryan Adams in the rain.

Still not quite through remembering, I took in the other people under the jungle canopy of Café Aouas as I told my story. A table of two younger men and two older men were watching soccer on the high TV above the Coca-Cola fridge. Fathers and sons, drinking ouzo. Before them lay the remains of a meal, and sometimes they turned over the cucumbers and olives and calamari when something went wrong on the soccer field, but they never ate, and when something went as they had hoped, they drank. Another man heard them drinking and cheering and came out from the kitchen wiping a knife in his apron and sat on a chair's edge at their table, and he watched two seconds of the soccer game, but what had gotten them excited was over, mellowing to

a quiet warmth like the ouzo settling in their bellies, and the cook said something to the four men—I always miss everything good because of this lousy job, his Greek lament—and slapped the knife against his thigh and went back to the kitchen.

He passed an elderly couple sitting at the table in the corner, on the same side of the table, where they ignored their food, too, turned toward each other, the old man with his cane between his knees. Through his papery brown skin showed the veins that led from his head back to his heart, dark as poison, but his hair was lush silver-white, his black eyes clear as he smiled at the woman whose face I could not see, smiling always. I could not see her mouth but knew from how she leaned toward his soft voice as he talked and talked, and how she forked something on his plate and forgot to eat it, that she did not yet wear the puckered scowl of disapproval of the old Greek women. The mouth that would become her mouth one day, at the moment of his inevitable death and her inevitable survival.

And then something occurred, just as Emma's husband rifled through his bedroom cupboard in my story, and the wattage in the air jumped. A woman entered from the right, as though onto a stage. I could not see any other way onto the patio, but there she was, stage right, in stovepipe trousers and a burgundy and teal rugby shirt screenprinted with huge kanji characters, and she threw her arms wide. The Greek woman ran out from the kitchen and crumpled the young woman's spine in her embrace, the top of her head at the woman's chin, and the girl's wine-red hair hung around her face and the tips came together just under her chin, at the top of her mother's head, like the mandibles of a mantis. A fat-necked man entered from the

wings, trailing a travel case on wheels. He stood with them, beaming like he'd just brought his wife a gift.

As I hurdled the barbed-wire fence and busted through the crusts of drifts and across the white field, the girl with the kanji shirt went around to the other tables, where everyone knew her and was happy she was home. The men watching soccer all kissed her cheeks, and the elderly couple stood and held her and each other in the loop their arms made. The fat-necked man took her bag across the patio, exiting stage left, and the girl went back into the open kitchen, and she looked around as if to say that she had been gone so long that she didn't know where to find her favorite pan, and her mother came from behind and set the skillet on the counter in front of her. The girl rested her hand on the old woman's shoulder to say how much she had missed being there.

I finished telling the story and Patrick called for another bottle of wine, but no one at Café Aouas seemed to remember that they were working. All the attention had turned to the girl in the kanji shirt. I excused myself to find the restroom and one of the men watching soccer pointed me down a hall, where the floor seemed to tip farther downhill with each step, where all the details of the moment now rolled away. I flipped up the lid of the toilet and stared at the wall. I thought, I will never remember the pattern of this wall. I looked at it hard, but it was still just a wall. In the mirror, my face was worse than I felt, coated in ugly yellow light. I was flushed pink with sunburn and wine, and my skin was like corpsewax. I gave myself a serious stare. Where are you? Do you know where you are? Is it always going to be like this—wandering through the same fog, the warmth of one night built on the cold of another,

unconnected, just moments scattered about, shot through with holes. Ah melodrama, there you are. I had to go before I gave myself to it completely, run away like the werewolf who hides the fur forming on the backs of his hands. I was going to take this night with me. I looked at the wall again, maybe for a long time, but I could not tell you now what it looked like or if I even saw it then.

When I returned to the table I stood behind my chair, already gone. I knew that if I stayed there with the Moulders on the patio of Café Aouas for another bottle of retsina that I might not make it home. I had arrived at this point with my new friends, where the only way to keep the memory of the night was to leave it. It was the only way to meet them again and feel that same new goodwill, too nuanced to explain just then. I thanked them for asking me to join them, ready to gush but stopping myself, clamping my jaw shut so fast that my teeth clicked. I went to my wallet for drachmas and knew that Patrick would not let me pay. He waved me off.

If you could manage to obtain that autograph, it would be worth ten dinners in peace and quiet, Patrick said.

Fuck, I thought and shook my head and was glad I had not said so. I have it, I said and patted my pockets. It was back at the hotel. I said, I could come by tonight.

Cara and Nadine looked excitedly to each other in a way that was unlike anything except the look of excited teenage girls.

Let's say breakfast tomorrow, Patrick said and stood.

Sure, I said and we shook hands.

I'll walk you out, Sharon said.

I was drunk again, woozy in the heart, a full-blown wolf under the moon. I nodded to Sharon and said goodbye to the girls and looked to meet the eyes of the girl in the kanji shirt, not sure why, but she was gone. Sharon stopped me when we emerged from the vines of the patio and into the now dark blue of the street, the floral and earth smells still in my nose but quickly whooshed away by the exhaust blast of a honking motorcycle. Here we were both just shadows, and I tried very hard to see Sharon Moulder like I had seen her in the light of the patio but nothing stayed the same.

I know this seems very forward, but we wanted to ask you something, she said. When you go back to London, after this, where will you go?

Oh, a hotel, I said.

Patrick and the girls and I talked it over, and we were wondering if it wouldn't be better for you if you came to stay with us in Essex.

Really?

Cara's all ready to move in with Nadine, and you could have her room. For as long as you like, as long as your trip allows. I think the girls are quite taken with you. All of this, if it doesn't take you away from your other travels, of course.

I'm speechless, I said.

Sharon and I started down the hill to the swell of noise on the harbor. Let's step in here for a moment, Sharon said and pointed to a little lit pastry shop. She nudged me inside and we stood on one side of a glass case, in the smell of warm butter and biscuit steam and thyme and roasted garlic. I did not know what we were doing.

There was no music in the shop, only the sound of the half-dead fluorescent lights and the hum of a refrigerator, and a man in front of us whispered to ask for a whole sheet of puffed dough from under the eye of the lamp, red as an injured eye. The boy behind the counter sliced it in strips with a double-handled knife with a blade like a sash and then sprinkled the pastry with cinnamon and sugar and wrapped the strips in newsprint. Sharon pointed to the pastries she wanted and the boy wrapped them in the same way, gave them to Sharon, and Sharon handed them to me. The packets were warm and where my fingers touched, the butter melted through in dark spots, the papers translucent, and the words on each page bled into each other and into my hands.

For later, Sharon said to me and handed the boy drachmas. She said, The goat cheese and ham ones are quite nice.

You really shouldn't, I said and we stepped back out onto the street.

She said, Would you consider it, then?

I wouldn't want to impose, I said.

You wouldn't be. Patrick has business travel coming up straight away after we get back, and it would be nice if you could stay with us.

I laughed and said, I feel like I have to tell you at this point that Emma's husband never really pulled a gun on me.

What? Oh, dear! That?

He owned a gun, and he was rifling around in the cupboard for it, but I don't know if it was even there, I said.

Alex, it's a much better story with the gun, you keep it that way.

I said, And he did say the thing about the how-would-you-like-to-look-down-the-barrel-of-a-loaded-forty-five.

Dear, your secret's safe with me. We'll see you at breakfast, then?

You will, I said.

Take care tonight, Alex, Sharon said and touched my shoulder and turned to go back up the street, to her family. I hurried down to the harbor and into Sorrento, feeling too good to go back to the hotel and Emma, if she was there, and I wanted to be alone with this good feeling for a little while. It was early still and quiet, and I took a seat at one end of the Sorrento bar. Venko was not there, but they still had Bud beer in bottles, and they still had ouzo, and How Soon Is Now? by The Smiths on the stereo, and a cricket match on television, and there was still plenty of time for everything.

I FOUND MYSELF on my hotel bed in all my clothes and the stark overhead light hard upon me. I slapped my neck, and a mosquito leaped away like a marionette pulled up from the stage into the rigging. I sat up. My eyes could only open as far as slivers. My tongue was a wind-dried towel. It could have been very late, I did not know. I went to the sink in the kitchenette and ran the tap but it would not get cold. I cupped my hands under the faucet and drank the cloudy water from them. I stood there. The water ran. On the table, the feta had soaked through the butcherpaper wrapping and sat in its own milky pool, and the salad ingredients felt like an idea I'd

had in another lifetime. I threw the feta in the trash, and my stomach hissed. My thumb passed through the flesh of the tomato, and I pitched that, too, and the cucumber, and the bell pepper and lettuce, and at that point, what fucking good were the olives or vinegar or olive oil going to do me? I stood there and the water ran. Maybe the bar was still open. I splashed some water on my face, then patted down my hair, and when I finally shut off the tap, its silence brought music in from outside, and the murmur of voices, and that meant it could not be so very late at all.

I went out the door, yanked it closed behind me, and took one step, and my spine clenched—my foot missed the step, I went down, arms up, fast blood into my ears and in my eyes, everything for just one second as bright as daylight and then quickly darkening to the cool of night, and I lay on my stomach at the base of that flight of stairs. I turned over, suddenly flushed with sweat. Around me, it was snowing black snow. I tried to speak, to yell, help, help, but nothing came out, like the weak punches of a dream, and now the snow had turned silver and was shimmering loud. And then I poked my head up through it, and there was no snow. I looked for my legs to move. They did, and I put them under me. I stood. I held the place in my lower back from where the twinge had come, but there was nothing there, and I went up the stairs.

I got to the bar, the same hollow, loud room it became at the end of every night, Manolis blasting Bryan Adams. He leaned over the bar, talking to a dark-haired young woman in an orange dress, two motorcycle helmets on the bar between them, and I stood behind the stool two down from hers and set my wallet on the bar.

Are you still open? I said. I looked around. There was no black snow here, and there had not been. I had gotten up too fast.

Have you been asleep all day? Manolis said to me and got up off his elbows and waved me in.

I took some time out to go get drunk, I said and pulled out the stool to sit.

Something is wrong, my friend? Manolis said and set a bottle of Amstel in front of me.

I almost said something about passing out, but that was not quite what it had felt like, and I said, I think I did something to my back.

Manolis said something in Greek to the young woman, and in what he said was my name. Manolis said to me, You know Irimi?

I reached over and shook her hand. My pleasure, I said.

I recognize you, she said and her English was good if not overly precise. She said, From the pool. Your girlfriend is very beautiful.

Manolis said, Irimi works at the snack bar.

I remembered her serving me beers on one afternoon. Now in her orange dress and sitting at the Hera Village bar, she seemed very pretty to me.

Manolis said to her, They are having the difficulties.

Do you need some aspirin or something? Irimi said and got her handbag from the floor.

I'm fine, thank you, though, I said. I think I've just gone out too many nights in a row.

If you do not feel better tomorrow, Manolis said, you will come and find me, and I will write you the prescription of good medicine.

Irini fished out a bottle from her purse, handed it to me. She said, Take some, you feel better. And there's a doctor at the hotel, too. A Russian.

I remembered the men on the poolside patio speaking Russian, and then I understood. My patients, I said. Not patience.

Do not trust the Russians, Manolis said. The Greek medicine is the best in the world.

I shook out four pills, washed them down with the rest of my Amstel, and asked Manolis for another. And ouzo, I said. Manolis set out three small glasses of ouzo, and Irini said no, that she'd had too much already, and she tapped one of the motorcycle helmets, and they spoke in Greek and then we all drank the ouzo together. We smoked and Manolis told us about Bryan Adams and played for us his favorite songs, and then he left for a minute and Irini asked if I was the American who had gone to the Poseidon with the Israeli lawyer Chaim, and I told her I was. Manolis came back with a reheated frozen pizza for himself and Irini, and he said I must share with them. It is Hawaiian, he said. That is the best one, he said and Irini told him we were talking about Chaim, and he said, Yes, it is very quiet here since he is gone—I tell you a story.

He said Chaim's full name, and I asked him to repeat it for me, and when I could not understand what he said the second time, I nodded as though I had gotten it and let Manolis continue. He said that Chaim was one of the most famous lawyers in Israel, and that he had been coming to Crete and Hera Village for years, since Manolis could remember, when he started working at the hotel for his father when he turned ten years old. Manolis told me that the night Chaim took me to the Poseidon was a strange one for Chaim—the man did not usually drink, but for some reason that night he had asked for a glass of good Metaxa, the Greek brandy in the same kind of oversized bottle as the ouzo, and Manolis did not think anything of it until he had poured it. Manolis asked him if everything was fine, and Chaim said yes, that he was feeling exuberant—and I liked the way Manolis said this word, *egg-ZOO-bare-end*—and that he wanted to come down to the bar to be with the people. The next thing, Manolis said, Chaim gave me a slap on the back and was asking me to go to another bar.

The only other time Manolis had seen Chaim drink was a few years earlier. Chaim was sitting at the bar drinking a 7-Up and lecturing Manolis on politics, on which they never agreed. Chaim was a very strict Jew and held to the belief that there were only two classes of people in the world—the Jewish, and their slaves. There was a group of young English rugby players in the bar, loud and stupidly boasting about how much they could drink, and Chaim told Manolis to watch. Chaim called out the leader of the group, a man whose face Manolis said looked like the cattle guard on a locomotive, and challenged the Englishman to a drinking contest. Ouzo, shots. The Englishman laughed and Chaim counted out five-hundred pounds sterling and set it on

the bar. The Englishman stopped laughing, and the rugby players went quiet. The leader collected money from the rest of his men until he had matched Chaim's stake, and he slapped it down on the bar and demanded the first drink.

Manolis said, Chaim was very clever, and he narrowed his eyes and tapped the side of his head to indicate the workings of the brain.

Chaim took his first shot, and so did the leader of the rugby players. Chaim began asking the man about England, and how it felt to be from a second rate nation, an empire on which the sun had finally set. The Englishman began to get upset. They took another shot, and Chaim aimed lower, asking what secretly took place in the scrum at the beginning of a rugby match, and he joked that the players probably had something pretty serious to hide in there, something Manolis now called, A thing of the homosexual involvement. Now the Englishman was redfaced and angry, and they continued to drink. Chaim was relentless, insulting his opponent's physical appearance, family, the likely size of his manhood. On the tenth shot, the Englishman drank, went to slam the glass on the bar, and instead went backward off his stool, completely passed out. Manolis was holding the money, and he gave it to Chaim, and the other rugby players carried their fallen leader back to his room. Chaim folded the bills into his wallet and ordered another shot for himself, toasted to his vanquished foe, and never said another word about it. He didn't have another drop of alcohol until the night he took me to the Poseidon.

Irini and I sat and drank while Manolis went about the business of closing the bar, and we walked out into the lobby together when he was done, and the quiet of the

hotel filled my ears. Irini went into the restroom to change, and Manolis zipped up his motorcycle jacket.

He said to me, This Emma. She is biggest love, or she is biggest hurt?

I said, What's really the difference.

Manolis said, With biggest love, you see other things. For a long time, many women come to me, say, Manolis, make the childrens with me. But I don't want this. I meet one, I think she is the one, but with her I am always sad. I do not know what to do, I am always scared. I think always that I will lose her, and she says make the childrens. But I do not. I don't know why I do not do this with her, she is biggest love. But then she is gone, to someone else, and I am glad I do not make the childrens with her, very happy, because she is not biggest love, she is biggest hurt.

I asked, You still think about her?

Yes, yes, Manolis said. This is not the point.

What was her name?

Petra. But this is not what I am trying to tell you.

I said, Have you had something else, then? The biggest love?

Yes, this is what I tell you. I am with Irini.

Oh, I didn't know, I said. She's lovely, Manolis.

He nodded and said, Do I think she is biggest love? I do not know. But listen to this. I don't lost time with the stupid people. You and I, we can talk of these things and I know you understand me. My English is no good. You should learn Greek, so

then we can understand each other. But I must tell you. Now, I am no scared. Now I stop and see the beauties. You must do this. A bird, a tree. You must write a poem or make a paint. Do you know? The name Irene—that is a name you have in English?

I nodded.

Manolis said, It means peace.

That's nice, I said and meant it and then remembered something that seemed like a long time ago. Hey Manolis, I said.

Yes, my friend.

Some men stole one of the shrines just down the road from the hotel earlier today.

Stole it? he said.

In broad daylight. Just rode right up, got out and plucked it out. I thought they were there to place a new shrine. I saw a funeral a couple of days ago. A woman went over the edge of the road, they said. Was it the other day? How long have I been here, Manolis?

No, no. Those men, they are bringing it back later, on another day.

Why take it? To fix something inside?

They are to building a wall so no one else goes off the road into the sea. These men, they will bring back the shrine when the wall is there.

Irini emerged in red leather pants and a denim jacket, and Manolis handed her a helmet and I went out the back doors of the lobby, and we stood on opposite sides of

the door and said good night. Manolis reminded me about the back medicine. It was very late. He turned the key and he and Irini went out the front, and I returned to my room.

I lay on the deadweight mattress on the stone slab that came out from the wall, dreamt of what Emma had told me about Greek doctors, the only thing I knew about them other than what Manolis claimed. Sometime after Emma had taken home the Air Force pilot from the Dutch Bar, she went to the gynecologist, driven by a dark feeling that bloomed inside her. It was the only time she'd been to see one who wasn't a woman, and she had avoided the Greeks' medicine because of some logical leap from the conditions in their restaurants, the sterility of the equipment somehow intrinsically linked to the unrefrigerated eggs on Evangelia's windowsill. The doctor was a man uncomfortably close to her own age, but had been to school in England, which made for awkward conversation, but at least it was about the Arsenal football club instead of where he had his thumbs. He stood, snapped off his gloves, and scanned her chart and a long spool of paper that looked like the printout from a seismograph. Her legs still in the stirrups, the doctor pulled a case from his white coat and lit a cigarette. He asked if she would like one, and she said yes, breathing relief, thinking this meant good news. He lit hers, and they smoked. He said, You're pregnant.

I slept.

PROBABLY THE BAR IN THE WORLD

ANOTHER DAY, punched out and sprayed the same Aegean blue as the other days. Spinalonga glowed bright blue across the seablue Elounda lagoon. Beneath skyblue. The taxi dropped me at the first apothecary, in the second building on the road into town. I sat on the stoop and the cool stone made bumps rise on my skin, and the sunshine was too early to be warm. I was feral with hangover, headsick but alive. Taxis rolled by. On the street the blue air came in to breathe away the café smells. The wind became rice steam, fried fish, cheeseburgers, old refrigerators that had once held gallons of ice cream but now sent forth only ice cream smell on the warm air. No one came to open the apothecary doors.

In the morning the town billowed up from inside the island itself, unmade by man. I walked into Elounda and the glare of purity eased, the brushstrokes showed. The tourists stirred. You noticed not the crates of sea sponges, but the cellophane that wrapped them and the butchered English of the labels. Not the bouzouki music but the bins of bouzouki tapes and CDs outside the shop doors, their promise to recreate a night in a Greek taverna that you may have never had. It was another day. I did not know how long I had been there, or how long I was to be there. Or where Emma was. In that way it seemed like any day in the last three years, like coming to London and Crete was already a very old memory, or part of a dream. If I purchased a Spong of Elounda Lagoon, would it be there when I woke up in America?

I bought an international newspaper and walked through the light-blasted town to find a café. The bright black ponytail of the waitress at the Camelot Café bounced like an elastic band. I sat at one of the empty tables. I pressed myself deep into the thick pads of the chairback. My ears flooded my own blood's stereo static, and the dark spots bloomed again, but not the snow. Slowly the world came into focus. Then the sonic rush was gone, and I became aware only of my skin, and the itch of the mosquito bites from the night before.

In the night the mosquitoes had abruptly discovered a taste for me. I'd thrown on the light and slapped my arms and chest and my face, the insects erupting red into the lifeline of my palm. Finally I slept inside the sheet, a cocoon of sweat and breath and the alcohol on my skin. Now in the daylight, I ran my hands down my sleeved arms and brushed the welts. A bite on my face, where my sunglasses touched my cheek. On my lower back was a knob of bites that seemed to catch fire when any part of my clothes touched, however I moved.

The waitress brought me instant Nescafé and a cold, crisp Greek salad I had watched her slice and arrange behind the countertop. I did not move as I ate, the bugbite knot pinned deep into the chair. I took off my sunglasses as the day's first shadow arrived over the patio. A quick chill cinched the air from my lungs. I lit a cigarette and smoked. An old man at another table lifted his own brown cigarette to me, and then his smile closed in and he looked closer at me, then away to the street, and he smoked and did not look my way again. I put on my sunglasses. The waitress looked at me and the flush of my tired, dry skin as she cleared my plate and brought me another cup of hot water and slim packet of dried coffee, but she said nothing. I

touched the lump on my cheek again and opened the newspaper. I looked at the page of words in front of me. I was too stupid to do the crossword, and could not feign interest in the stories of news abroad. I folded the paper again.

I had not had enough sleep, and my insides moved noisily, food sloshing through yesterday's ouzo. Here I was waking up when the rest of the world had been awake for hours, and it did not matter if they looked at me or did not look at me. It was not a strange feeling. I had been doing this for years and the state of hangover is not one for reflection. Instead, you react to what you've done to yourself, realize the wrong things. As I smoked on the veranda of the Camelot Café, I decided to never touch alcohol again, then just as certainly felt I should get drunk immediately, wanted to go back to bed or make the most of everything, wanted to tell Emma what I thought or just let her go. Choose the less childish thing for once in my life, or do something stupid. My brain was useless. This at least was familiar, and familiarity was good enough for now.

The waitress left the bill in a plastic tray on my table. As soon as I had counted out enough drachmas, I remembered breakfast with the Moulders. Too late. As I stood, a jolt shot through me, lurching up into my throat with the cold vegetables, and I lay my palm on the table to steady myself and swallowed. The waitress poked her head out from the restaurant, and said, You are okay?

Is there a pharmacy nearby? I asked. I pointed to my spine.

She held her hand to her collarbone and nodded to the building next door. In the window, between a toaster oven and a stained-glass Tiffany lamp, was a green square lit up with a white cross like the sign over the hospital.

Inside the shopfront were mismatched mantles and shelves packed with kitchen appliances and extension cords and connectors, outlet covers, light switches, and spools of copper wire, and in the back of the store was an apothecary windowfront. A woman wore eyeglasses and a white coat with the same green square and white cross. She asked in English if I needed anything and before I could think of what to say, I pointed to my back and asked her if she had something for bug bites. But I wanted something for sick headaches and backaches and burning eyes and sour stomach and dead raw skin and tiredness and oversleeping and homesickness and heartsickness. For darts of pain, for gnawing pain. I wanted a potion in a fantastic comic vial that would make me remember what it was that I used to want. I wanted to want something else. The woman sold me a bottle of eucalyptus salve for ten thousand drachmas. For now, bugbites. I roused a taxidriver from his backgammon at the queue and went back to the hotel.

In my room I threw off my shirt and rubbed the eucalyptus on my back, spread it down my arms and on my face and dropped onto the bed. In the other room, something clattered, papers shaking in the wind. I did not hear Emma. I did not know if she was there. I held still, crossed my arms on my chest, a dead man.

A windowpane bleated open in the bathroom, and then something crashed onto the toilet with a clang. Then another. And another. I stepped forward, my blood awake with the grit of Nescafé and a surge of last night's ouzo, the tendons in my shoulders ready to fly apart like cut wires.

And at the lower left of the bathroom doorframe appeared the long Greek face of a cat, and with it, its kitten, and then more kittens, and the small cats shot out into

the room. I had to smile. I reached down to pick one up, and my back jerked tight. One blast of black snow. The mother cat slunk past my ankles. I nabbed the kitten, a white one with gray face and black-and-white striped tail, and I stood and the headflood drained away. I held the kitten by the scruff and looked it in the eyes. I said, You are looking at a man who has no perspective on anything in the entire universe.

I collected the cats and lobbed them out the door and when they leaped back in through the open panes of the front window, I had to toss them further. I latched the front window and the one in the bathroom. I should get out of the room, maybe have a beer and get a tan. Be on holiday in Greece. The cats had come to push me outside. I changed into the bright green swimming trunks—every hair on my leg ached, every pore seemed to rattle like a sore tooth—and grabbed a towel, and when I went outside, the breeze frosted across the small of my back. The kittens kept leaping at the door and window, soft paws dragging on the glass. The mother cat looked at me knowingly as all cats do, and I went to the poolside café.

Here in the height of day every chaise held a body, and the pool was loud with bodies. Children splashed and cried in happiness or need for attention. Or sometimes, but not often, real pain. But always cries. Always, under every sound in the day, was the bouzouki music. I came down the stairway by the bush that looked like rolled green tongues and saw it as though for the first time—on the same leafstems were knots of putty-colored berries: chickpeas. I crossed the walkway between the shallow children's pool and the main pool, looking out only for a second at two teenage girls on bright floating lounges. Both wore royal blue bikinis, one face down and making a

whirlpool in the water with her arm, and the other, less pretty, lazing on her back and looking through the valley between her large, upright breasts at the other girl. I had seen them together in the hotel bar, dressed up but still young looking, and I had seen them outside a taverna in Elounda with their parents. One time. One of those nights. The large-breasted girl looked up as I passed and I looked away.

Irini was behind the bar at the café, in a sleek black top and linen trousers that ruffled like a flag in the wind. She said hello and used my name, and I said, Hello, Irini. I was happy to see her there. I said, Can I have an Amstel?

Of course you may, she said. You feel better this afternoon?

I do, I said.

I meant about the woman, Irini said and I wished suddenly that I had never said anything to Manolis about Emma, or to anyone else. I did not want to talk about her anymore. Today was a new day, this moment was new.

I said, I am recovered.

I will just say this, Irini said. Women like it when men are men. Maybe you just have to go get her.

Irini lifted her chin and I looked over my shoulder to where her chin had pointed. Emma sat on the edge of the pool on the opposite side, her ankles cut off by the water. She was grinning and talking to a man in front of her, swimming in place with one arm and the other hand holding the lip of the pool, next to her uncrossed left knee. It was the back of a man's head, dark and sealslick from having been underwater, and it was a man's arm holding the edge. A rope of an arm. Emma

laughed the laugh that was her laugh. I hadn't seen her because I was looking at the teenagers. My eyes could not right now take much more than one thing in at a time.

I said to Irini, It's not that easy. But every thought in my head was gone.

It is self-defense to forget, Irini said.

Then let's just forget about it all, and we won't need to defend anything.

Your business is your business. What do I know?

The only thing I want is that beer. So could you please get me an Amstel.

Of course, she laughed.

Irini turned to the Coca-Cola case. She got a beer, capped it, gave it to me, and I drank. I patted my pockets. Irini said not to worry. Manolis had told her I was a good customer.

I turned and did not look across the pool to Emma, and there, on my side near the edge of the hotel, was an empty chaise. I sat down and drank my beer all at once.

I lay on the chaise on my stomach and felt the sun and the eucalyptus salve on my back working to undo what was under my skin. But the chaise was no good for lying on your stomach. I rolled over, peeling away from the chair, and the sweat on my skin wicked as soon as it touched the air.

I pushed my back into the slats. I wanted to be in the water, for just a moment, just to feel cold and then let the sun warm me again—I liked the way the salt dried you out fast, and all there was to do was lie there and listen for the bell tolling in the church tower far down the coastline in Aghios Nikolaos, and sleep was easy. But now

I was too warm, and Emma was there. I lay awake. I closed my eyes and thought, This is a man who does not want anything. But it wasn't the truth.

I felt the clouds come across the sun. I looked up. They moved from the west, eminent, white clouds that went deep into the sky, darkening to black in the distance. There was no break in them. No sunlight on its way. I watched three slow clouds come to take the place of those over me now, but the dark clouds had stopped, hanging there, everything else moving behind them or in front. They stayed. They were not shaped like anything but were full of shapes.

I couldn't remember the last time I had tried to name the shapes of clouds, or, for that matter, the last time I had watched clouds at all. When was the last time I did any of the things I did when I was a kid that made me happy. And just because I enjoyed conversation with the bartender at the end of the night did not mean that I was soliciting opinions on what I should or should not do, so fuck you, Irini.

In the south holes opened in the clouds and from them splayed golden light. The sun came out above me, a bright flat copper disk, on me and my dark red skin, on everyone else at the pool, and you could feel that all of the bodies had been waiting for the sun again, our skin was hungry for it. The coppery sun was on Emma, too, and the man staring up her legs to her gold bikini, for anyone to see if they looked, the light on them just like the rest of us.

But I did not look. We were far past the time when I could have gone to get her. Maybe if I had gone to London back then. Now I was here, too late, and all of that seemed like a very long time ago, and I did not know if it was something I would have wanted, anyway. Doubt had stopped me from going, had made the excuses that

prevented us from being together. But that thinking was beyond me now. Above me, the clouds covered the sun like an eyelid closing and the light with it went away.

The three dark clouds stayed and the new clouds kept coming, above, behind, below. The new white spun and twisted and stretched and melted out into other clouds, and the dark clouds seemed for a moment to take the same shapes they had held a few minutes before—a difference so small that you noticed only because the shapes had changed at all, forming again into mountains of dark clouds among clouds that looked like clouds. Through the layers came pockets of blue air, gauzy sheets, bubbles of other cloud like small bombs, and, sometimes, the blades of white light to the south. Eventually the disk of sun appeared in another eye between the clouds, and I could see I had been wrong. All of the clouds had been moving, drifting away to the east. As mortal as they could be.

The dark mountain clouds were miles away now, and with the sun finally on me with no break in sight, I was able to fall asleep, could feel it before it came over me, and that—even with my weakened mind telling me so, I knew—was one of the best senses to experience. I smiled as I stretched my toes, a man for whom sleep finally meant rest. The stiffness in my back was gone.

TWO SECONDS LATER, Emma covered me in her shadow, and I snapped awake as if she'd sprayed me with a hose, choking for air and my heart rising against my ribs. The sunshine filled the clouds around her, but the air was cold, her hair was that beautiful lunar platinum that only darkened her face in shadow. She had her hands on her knees, leaning over me, and I inhaled the fake tan.

Oh, hello, she said to my opening eyes.

Emma, I said and pressed my heart back down into my chest.

She looked at me. You're not—how are you—were you sleeping?

It was the idea, I said.

Right, she said. I was going to as well and kept on getting chatted up. So irritating, especially when there are plenty of other women around. God, did you see those two girls in the blue bikinis?

I was sleeping, I said. I didn't really notice anything. I sat up a little and adjusted the chair behind me, and now I could smell her hair and skin, the smell underneath whatever smell she wore as lotion or perfume, the smell of her like only I knew. Her face was now very close to mine, and she did not move away.

Emma looked past me and said, That one has the most perfect chest I have ever seen. Silly cow. I wish I'd looked like that when I was fifteen, Emma said, then looked down at her own cleavage as though to confirm that she was no longer herself of fourteen years ago.

I did not say anything, did not look where she expected me to look.

Emma said, I was heading back, though, now, and saw you here. I finished Lawrence Durrell.

Okay.

Alex, do you have any plans for tomorrow evening?

I crossed my hands on my stomach. I don't know, I said.

Because if you already do, I'd understand. I had promised to take you to the raki bars at least one night.

I forgot, I said and could not think of anything else to do except lie.

When we were at the Medusa, I think, Emma said. Anyway, I thought I would try to keep this promise.

I looked at her, this woman I no longer knew but remembered so well. I had not forgotten her. Where the loose hair fell along her face in tendrils, I still wanted to touch it and place it behind her ear. I wanted to pull her by the hips, close to me, turn her whole body back and forth where I held her, arms spinning out, until she protested. I wanted to hear her say my name like it meant something else to her. Not just a word to say, or something to punctuate argument or instruction. I wanted to taste the fake orange tan, wake up with it. The urge was to shoot to my feet right then and take her, shove my mouth against hers and deliver her to the room like meat bought back from the hunt. But there was that space between us. Three feet. Three years. What I wanted no longer mattered. We were going to pretend to be friends for the rest of this trip, but all that was left was the embalmed body of what had been, and we were now the separately bereaved. And then we would be nothing. We had never been friends, and never would be. We lacked the things that friendship needs. Ours was something else, a chemical or animal thrill. It was something that had made us do whatever we had to do to be together. Something that made us ascendant over reason, or maybe just bound to ill-reason—whatever it was, it required taste and smell and sound and touch, and so long as now there was this space between us, we were separate, and there was no visceral electric start. I had been wrong to think that seeing Emma again

could transport us to some time before things had gone wrong between us. We would return to England, and I would go home to America and know that I had not changed anything there, and all I would have carried home with me for having seen Emma one last time was knowing, finally, how it would end. At least that, at last. It did not matter now if I got up and kissed her, because for her there would still be the same amount of space between us. I opened my eyes to her, and all she was was a beautiful woman I did not know. I said not one thing.

At any rate, Emma said and stood back, and her voice had changed. Her tone seemed borrowed from someone else, someone formal and precise. She said, I best be off. So perhaps tomorrow evening we could get together, share a taxi into Elounda, then, and I'll show you around a bit.

Maybe we will, I said and avoided the use of her word. Perhaps.

I closed my eyes again and felt the warmth return to my skin as she walked away. All I could think was, Tomorrow?

I got up. My bare feet on the baking stones the only sound. I went to the pool. Most of the people had gone. On the shallow end were the girls in blue bikinis, and only the reflection of waves against them made ripples on the surface, radiating out from them like long slow surf. When was the last time I had done anything. I stood at the deep edge of the pool, looked down into the bottom, an unspecial vat of water. When I was a child, I had been the same person I was now. I was not the kind of person who needed spectacle or spotlight. And even then, even very young, I had always known the feeling of others' eyes upon me. The difference was that when I was a child I would have done what I wanted to do anyway. If I had wanted her three

years ago, I would have gone to London then. Here is a dead mother's son. I walked to the diving board, climbed its five tall steps, and strode out to the end springing end.

When was the last time I had done anything, I could not remember. I could remember three years ago in operatic fictional detail, but not what I'd worn or eaten or seen yesterday, nor even the whole sentiment of the last week of my life. Where was Emma, where was anything, I did not know. I jumped from the board.

My feet hit the water and my arms hit and I shot down into it, but was not filled with glee, and my back felt as though for one second it was not a part of me, the shock of it taking form somewhere outside my body, and a jolt of real fear illuminated the ghostwhite feet of the teenage girls below the green surface, and my legs were gone, too, and I went down, like the first time in water, no sound, no light, no black snow, just blackness. Jets of bubbles blasted out my nose and mouth, and there was saltwater in my nose, and it hit the back of my throat. I clawed upward. Now my back felt clamped on. My legs followed as my head broke through to the air, and it was snowing, and I could see through it, and there was blood in the water. I bobbed in the water and spit out as much as I could and gasped and paddled to the edge, dragging my legs behind.

I thought, Holy fuck, and then I said, Holy fuck, and I threw my arms up onto the cobblestone lip, and I made my legs move, my toes slapping up the sides of the pool wall, against the grip of my clamped back, and somehow then I was laid out flat on my belly on the edge over the pool in a lake of seawater, coughing hard, spitting salt. My nose was bleeding. Then I could feel the eyes. I sat up and pulled the slick peak of wet hair from my forehead and pushed it back, and I wiped the end of my

nose, and I got up onto my feet, and there was the feeling again of carrying some extra body behind me, swelling in pulses, its anchor sunk deep in my nerves. I held my towel to my nose, and I moved as quickly as my stiff legs would let me back to the room. It was evening on Mirabello Bay.

I threw open the door and the cats raced back inside, and I flung the towel on my bed. Emma was nowhere. I held my head back and tasted the blood in my throat, grabbed the salve, filled the cup of my hand with it, and slopped it onto my skin. Eyes closed, I waited. In a few seconds, the cold prickles rose, and my ribcage filled again with breath. This was not enough. I grabbed a T-shirt from the pile of dirty laundry next to my bag and wiped the cold poolwater from my arms and legs, shook it through my hair, and changed out of the trunks and into clothes fast, shoving my legs into khakis even as now my back muscles buckled in spasms, and the snow was a constant dark tunnel. I grabbed a wad of toilet paper from the bathroom, held it to my face, swallowing back the flow. I tied each shoe with one hand, my leg fully extended along the length of the bed.

As I hurried to leave the room, one of the kittens leaped onto my leg and hung there for a second from its tiny pinprick claws. I could not collect them all. I opened a window, and went out of the bungalow, and back to the hotel bar to find Manolis.

There was no one in the bar. I stepped in, knees locked, my palm flat on my back. In the day the bar was used as a lunch buffet, now emptied, and the only voices were coming from the small auxiliary kitchen. I craned over the emptied clawfooted chafing trays on the buffet line to see down that hall. I did not see anyone. Nor back in the lobby, not the old white-haired man behind the front desk, either. I looked for a

door to the kitchen. I called out hello and knocked on the wall. I looked at the toilet paper I'd held under my nose, and the bleeding was gone, and I could see the bright beautiful red against the pillowy white, and I could see everything else around me.

Yes, can I help you, came the answer. Manolis. I stuffed the toilet paper in my pocket. I looked in under the archway, and in the orange evening window light and single overhead bulblight of the small kitchen he and another man stood on opposite sides of a butcher block pulled out into the center of the room. On the block was some hacked-off piece of animal, white bone in the center of a slice of dark pink meat, and the other man held it by a bone knob in one hand, and in his other hand he held a thick-bladed knife curved like a scimitar. The knife was filthy with animal fat. Manolis wore a long kitchen apron over his button-up shirt and slacks, pristine. A tired dog lay in the last sunlight that came in through the back door.

My friend, you have been swimming? Manolis said when he saw me. Alex this is Manolis.

The other Manolis smiled at me, but said nothing. This meant he did not speak English. He had blonde curly hair and gaps in his smile where his eyeteeth should have been, and this, and the silence, made him friendly. Even with the big knife.

The Manolis I knew said, Manolis has raised a pig and I am helping him to do the butchering and freeze it for the winter.

On the tile counter behind them were black plastic sacks full of meat. A large pot bubbled on the stove, and the air was full of warm broth and the smell of the pork.

What brings you? Manolis said.

You said something about some kind of medicine, I said.

You are still not feeling well?

I nodded.

Manolis said something to the other Manolis, and then patted down his pockets. I do not have paper, Manolis said to me. Do you have a moment?

Sure, I said and gripped the edge of a table near me.

We are almost finished here, Manolis said.

I can wait, I said.

Manolis nodded to me, and then spoke to the other Manolis, and they went back to work. Manolis lay brown paper under the leg of swine on the block—and I wondered just why exactly Manolis couldn't write whatever he needed to write on the butcher paper—and the other Manolis struck his blade into the meat. With two more swings, he broke through the bone. Manolis delicately picked out the boneshards and set the sliced meat aside, and the other Manolis hacked into the leg again. There was a cigarette smoldering in an ashtray set on the divider between sinks, and Manolis stubbed it out, turned to me, shook his head, and brought the ashtray to me.

I am so rude, he said and pulled his cigarettes from his front shirt pocket. I shook my head, got out my own and lit one, and Manolis smiled at me. He said, Manolis has raised this pig up to sixty-five kilograms, and he feeds it only the best. No chemicals, no vitamins, antiviotics, only the good things. Just fruits, some potato, grain.

Manolis said something to the other Manolis.

He said to me, This is the pure stuff. Steaks, he said and held one up for me.

I held onto the table and smoked. On it were carrots, potatoes, onions, and celery in large earthenware bowls, stems of rosemary and thyme, and unlabeled spice shakers full of different shades of yellow, orange, and green dust. I bent over a little onto the table, and it eased on my spine. Manolis and Manolis chopped the leg apart, and Manolis packed the meat in black garbage sacks and squeezed out the air and spun them and tied tight knots, and he threw the long strips of white fat into the frothing pot, and the other Manolis brought another slab of pork from the tall, old wooden icebox next to the back door. The dog lifted its jaw from the stone floor, sniffed once, and lay its head down again. I breathed the pork meat air. I snubbed out the first and lit another cigarette. Manolis set more paper on the block, and the other Manolis made slits in the pork flesh and then chopped, and he split ribs and whacked through tendon and sinew, and the paper underneath was slashed to ribbons, and the strips stuck to the meat and the waste. I bent over more onto the table, leaned on my elbows. The other Manolis went to the icebox for another chunk of pig.

We are nearly there, Manolis said.

The two Manolises chopped and separated and slashed ribbons of paper and threw scraps into the stockpot and packed away the meat, and they spoke Greek to each other. When there was no more light in the dog's doorway, it stretched and watched the butchering for just a second and then went out the door.

Manolis told me again that this was the pure stuff, and that we do not care so much for our bodies as we should. He lit himself a cigarette. I nodded, my back frozen, and inhaled raw pork and pork steam and the smell of my ashtray and the

smoke as it curled from the end of each new cigarette, nothing in my stomach but booze and salad. The two Manolises butchered three more unrecognizable blocks of pig, using the plastic trash bags to line the block when they ran out of butcherpaper, and then there were black plastic slashed apart shreds stuck to the pork and the other Manolis's knife and Manolis's fingers.

The other Manolis loaded sacks onto a cart, and Manolis wiped his sticky fingers on his apron, pulled it over his head, and came to me. Okay, my friend, he said, and we went out of the small kitchen and through the bar to the lobby and the front desk.

Manolis went to the other side, wrote something on a slip of paper, and handed it to me. I could not read the Greek. You take it to apothecary, they will understand, Manolis said. I set my room key on the counter.

Manolis handed me my passport and looked at me. He said, I am sorry I do not remember your surname.

I said it for him.

Manolis said, I see. There is something I do not understand.

I said, I need a taxi into Elounda.

For the apothecary, my friend? Manolis said.

I went to one there earlier today, I said.

You will go into Aghios Nikolaos, Manolis said. There is a twenty-four-hour apothecary, he said and I thought how late it could possibly have become while they

had butchered the pig. He asked if I knew where the main square was, where I would find the taxicab office, and I said yes.

Where I waited outside, night had come. It did not take long for the taxi to arrive, and we raced down the cliffroad to the town, the sun long gone in the west, and I held on to the door handle tight and pressed hard against the floorboards with my legs and shoved my back into the knuckles of the bucket seat. I did not remember to light a cigarette. The driver looked at me once and asked if I had hurt my back, and I said yes, and that was all we said except for one last thing from me, The apothecary in the main square, right next to the taxi queue, as fast as you motherfucking can.

We drove the humid coast road into town, but just as we approached the central harbor, right past Mr. Chippy, the driver took a sharp right, and the taxi climbed fast up the winding roads into the hills above the lake. We turned right again, toward the hospital, and circled a roundabout, then passed the antiquities museum, and the road that became the open-air bazaar, now empty in the evening. I looked at the driver, we were going the wrong way. Just one left, down that road, and right there, where the lake and the sea meet under the bridge. The driver looked only straight ahead, and we followed a line of other cars through the trenches of the streets, swerving in and out, and the road curved and we raced into it, a car parked along every inch of wall in every curving alley, and we were like the caboose of that train of cars, the end of a whip. I looked over and we were high above the town, over the lake, at the high corner where the stairway led straight down, then shooting down the road along the other side, where the Skai bar was with its huge, grocery-store letters, and then the road opened up into a circular plaza ringed by neat blocks of gardenbeds and

shrubs, and we rolled to a stop. I turned to my right, to the green glowing pharmacy insignia, and next to that, another taxi queue. This was what Manolis had meant by the main square—a part of town where I had never been.

In the pharmacy, I handed the man the paper Manolis had given me, and the man asked if I wanted seventy-five milligrams or one hundred milligrams, and I said I did not care—any dosage please! He handed me a little cardboard box with a sleeve of pills inside, and I gave him the six hundred drachmas he asked for.

I pinched two triangular pills from their bubbles, I gripped them in my fist, the rest of the medicine in its packet in the other, and I went down toward the harbor to find a café. The road sloped sharply below the garden square. I leaned back, followed my shoes where the soles clapped the paving stones, a zombie coming down a graveyard hill. Here was an Italian trattoria and two seconds of gypsy melody from its stereo that disappeared into the noise of the street. Then a newsagent, an ice cream parlor, a women's shoe store, a gallery of art prints, and an athletic shop whose windows were strung with Greek football jerseys. Here there were no eyes upon me, only tourists and the sounds of them. They picked up enormous faux-leather purses and inspected them from every angle. They stood solemnly in the line for the ATM machine, the deadweight of what they'd bought pulling their arms straight. Here there were no cars, and the people moved up and down the slope in the middle of the street, passing under the strings of white lights and cometstreaked sky above.

I walked past an open doorway under a sign that said Lipstick Disco, where inside there was a long stairway and the pulse of music but not a single person, and I came upon a gyro shop called Seagull, and I knew I was not going to stop there but I

said to myself to remember it, to come back after I'd taken my medicine, but as I passed I saw the windowgrate was pulled halfway down, and the backlit gyro photograph was unlit, and inside, the spindle on which should have been a spool of stacked meat was empty and as clean as something you'd see in America. Then there was the street-side entrance of the Voulesmeni café, the DuLac. I stepped up the stairs, bent my knees, straightened them, and sweat rushed to the line of my scalp and my collar. Through the French doors of the dark and breezy room was the patio, where two young women were rolling dice, and further, the glassy black pane of the lake and its trembling reflection of the hill-lights and marquees above, upside-down but clear. I went to the counter and a man with a mohawk and a woman with bleach-orange hair and dark yellow rings under her eyes stood and watched as I approached, and they did not move to me. I leaned on the countertop.

I said excuse me, the woman came forward, and I handed her five hundred drachmas and asked for a bottle of water. She got one from the bottom of the glass pastry case, a tiny bottle, eight ounces. I threw the pills in my mouth and downed the whole bottle. I leaned my head back, breathed, and waited for the healing to come over me, like a wave, something so forceful it could not be denied. When I opened my eyes the jaundiced young woman was still looking at me and my back was still sore.

I went out and around the building to the long stairway that took me to the umbrellaed tables of the lake cafes. To work the stairs, I held the rail, kicked out a leg, fell onto the next step, and landed. I stopped at the first landing, under the placard of the Café DuLac. It said, Finest Raki in all of Crete—1,000 drs.

All of the cafés were empty. It was still too early. I sat at one of the tables, the weight of my body shifted over to my right elbow to stretch out my left side, and after a very long time, a man brought me a menu and set a water glass on the table in which there was a knife and a fork and a paper napkin. I asked for a bottle of Mythos, and after another long time, the man brought the beer and did not fill the water glass. I ordered pastitsio. When the food came out my beer had been gone for ten minutes and the man did not offer me another. He stood in the back of the restaurant along the bar and watched a basketball game on television. The pastitsio was simple and good—layers of noodles and béchamel with nutmeg and cinnamon and ground meat, browned on the top, with a ramekin of crumbled hard cheese on the side—but the french fries tasted of the freezer and old oil.

No one else came to sit on the patio. While I ate a father and his son fished on the edge of the boardwalk next to the lake, each dangling his bare feet, and they sat together quietly and their lines never moved. The red, blue, and white boats barely moved from their moorings. I tried my beer bottle one more time and got from it one tiny drop.

I smoked two cigarettes and waited for the man to bring the bill. He never came. I went to him and said I would like to pay. He seemed shocked, as though he could not understand why I would not want to stay on the patio of his café with a dirty plate and empty bottle in front of me. I paid and left no tip.

I walked to Bar Sorrento, through a crowd of middle-aged Englishmen and women dressed in garish formalwear, and from the bridge I could see the café barker

with the Beethoven hair headed on up to his work. He carried a leather bag, tucked into his arm like a football, but it was still a purse. I was not fooled.

The sign outside said, Sorrento: Probably The Bar In The World? I opened my wallet, and there was nothing there. I staggered back across the bridge and up the road to the only ATM I had seen, and above, on the balcony of the Taverna Lamborghini a beautiful woman with white-blonde hair waved, and I put my head down and went to the cash machine. I took out one-hundred-thousand drachmas. I went back to Bar Sorrento as fast as I could. The woman on the balcony was gone. Venko the drug-dealer was there behind the bar, and I could not sit entirely on the stool, so I stood next to it and sat halfway on. In a half-hour I was drunk and could do anything I wanted.

DO YOU KNOW what the word exhume means? Do you know what it is to be exhumed, Venko? I said. On the television, men in yellow uniforms were running across a green field, and on the bar in front of me was a new glass of Irish whiskey and a Bud, and Venko's open pack of Marlboros. I had run out of cigarettes a long time ago. Everyone else at the bar was singing along with Neil Diamond, Sweet Caroline, my least favorite song. At least right at that moment.

Venko said, I do not know. It is American?

English, Venko, I said. I speak English. A person is exhumed when they're dug up after they've already been buried.

To exhume is to dig something up? he said.

Dig someone, I said. Someone after they're dead, and they've been put to rest in a grave. You ever hear of anything like that?

The Greeks in the mountains, Venko said. I have heard of them. After five years the women take the bones from the earth, and they wash the bones with wine, and they pray and give the bones to the family.

Isn't it the worst thing, Venko. I don't think there's anything worse. Not in the psychological universe.

Sure, sure.

If there's anything worse, I don't know it. I'm a professor of death, Venko. The history of death. I know about this sort of thing, you should listen to me if you want to learn something.

You tell me you are writer.

That's just a story, Venko. You ever known someone who died? I said.

Yes, my grandmother, my uncle. A girl I knew from school.

They dig any of them up later?

No, no... why would they?

That's just what I'm saying. Why would they. You know one week in air equals two weeks in water equals eight weeks buried in the ground. It's the worst thing. No one who's been in the ground should ever have to be brought back into the air. It's not something you should think about. Don't you think it's the worst thing?

I think it sounds like it is the worst thing, as you say.

It is, I said. It is.

THE HOPE

THE FIRST SUNLESS DAY on Crete. The clouds could not decide whether to be clouds. Instead the sky was an even film of purple and amber, one cloud, like the light in a city at three in the morning just before it snows. On the taxi stereo an elephant wailed over a jangly guitar, and it was the only sound as we rolled down the hill from the hospital to the pharmacy from the night before. The drivers at the queue had put away their noisy backgammon and dominoes, and sat in reverence of a chess board, and the limbs of the shadeless tree above them were dark and still as dead hands. One driver wiped the dash of his Mercedes, one leather-soled shoe out the door in the street, one black sock, one band of white leg between the sock and the gabardine cuff. The sidewalk tobacconist booth had its awning drawn in and all of its spinners and racks pulled from the walk, the bundles of magazines in unslashed bales. No one sat at Café Obelix, there was not a soul at Café Fantasy. I waved goodbye to the old men at the taxi queue, but they were looking up as if to ask the sky for something, sun or rain, anything other than this, which was like no sky. But I didn't need the sky to be more than it was. It was the sky over Aghios Nikolaos on the last day I would see it. Tomorrow I was going home. In the morning, I'd take the bus to Heraklion, take the next flight to Athens, and go back to America.

I went back up the high lake road to a market I had seen on the way the night before, and I bought a pack of Camels there in the funereal store. Everywhere, young

men and young women on one side of the counter, me on the other side, money going away, replaced with that rare souvenir—knowledge. Is that not what anyone hopes to find when they go anywhere—to know something they did not know before? Just a little time, some money, and I was filled with that feeling of knowing. I passed the Skai café, split in two levels on the slope of the hill, and stopped at the long railed walkway that overlooked the high end of the lake, stood between the strange, thick palms. This was the view in the postcards, but with no sun the lake was cooled lead and so was the sea, and if you watched one person down on the café walk, you could hear their shoes on the stone. Far off, across Mirabello Bay was Hera Village, and Emma somewhere in those connected white boxes or somewhere else, I did not know. I stood there smoking my Camel, knowing.

I walked through the back streets and alleys, damp laundry on every line, the green cross of the hospital always overhead against the pale screen of afternoon. A butcher's white cargo truck opened ahead of me, and the man inside dragged a hook across the ceiling of the truck toward the open door, and he squeezed past fresh kills of beef and a xylophone of ribs I now recognized belonged to a pig, and brought forth one hook with a massacre of skinned rabbits hanging like a hand of bananas. I passed a movie theater whose windows were broken and cloudy with nothing on the unlit marquee and a broadside from a World War II movie in a chicken-wired frame, and walked across four empty lanes and through the roundabout near the hospital. I would go to the bazaar, find something to take home with me, so I would never forget.

The road sloped down, and I looked up to the buildings around me, I was on the road where the bazaar had been, and there were stacks of empty forklift pallets

painted Cretan blue, and trash like confetti, and the smell of new clothing and ripe raw fish was still in the air, but there were no tents or booths or trucks or tourists.

Nothing. A lone boy swatted at a pile of cellophane with a broom and chased it up the road. I went back up to the intersection where the souvlaki vendor had been grilling pork on his grate, where I'd seen the carts of honey and herbs, and I looked down that aisle to a long, empty, gravel road.

There were no children in the playground. No plainclothes security guard at the museum lazing on a larnax to smoke her cigarette. I came upon Café Aouas, and the lights already on in the afternoon and, at last, voices from the jungled patio. I walked a little ways farther, remembering the pastry shop—and, all at once, that I'd left the pastries Sharon Moulder had bought for me at Sorrento that night, that I'd never gotten Patrick the autograph for the girls, all at once remembered how bad a friend I could be when given the chance. No matter. I'd never see them again. I went all the way down to the harbor, where no kiosk laid out its wares. On one ouzeri patio whose chairs were still stacked and banded together with a lanyard, there was an old television set, gutted out and filled with earth, and something like alfalfa grew out the top and through the dark screen you could see the wormtunnels. Somehow I hadn't seen the pastry shop. I went back up the hill, back to Aouas. I looked in, and a very pretty teenage brunette girl smiled, and she came right to me, threw her hands to her hips.

Hi, I'm sorry, we're not serving food yet, she said, her accent distinctly American. She said, Another hour or so.

I said, Do you know a pastry shop on this street?

Can't think of one, the girl said, making it almost like a question.

I looked past her, hopeful for some idle Greeks and their constant, disapproving stares. I said, Is there anyone else here who might know?

I know the neighborhood really well, she said. She was the first American I had spoken to in a month, and I felt the urge to rush home quickly cool.

There was a young woman here the other night, it looked like she had just come back from a trip, I said. She seemed to know—she seemed to be a local.

Stephanie? She's my roommate, but she's no more local than me.

She's American, too?

The girl nodded. Listen, if you're hungry, you can sit here and wait, but I'm just getting off shift, so you can't drink or anything.

I went back down to the harbor. At Café Albatros I drank three beers and smoked, looking out from under the umbrellas past three beautiful Czech women to Voulesmeni. Two of the women were dressed the same, in skintight shirts and dyed-dark men's jeans with wide rolled cuffs, and all of the women wore sunglasses on top of their heads, and all wore slender, tall-heeled shoes so slim that they looked like ink-drawn lines on bare feet, and when the third woman stood and walked out to the rail at the lake to talk on her cell phone, she seemed to be balancing on her toes and tiny black straws. The women smoked, and I smoked. We were the only people on the patio of Albatros, the only people on any patio on this side of the lake in the middle of the afternoon. Albatros was the home of Spageti Special From Oven, a place I now realized I had chosen not because of the women, who sat after I had finished my first

beer, but only because I recognized the sign. The green photograph did not look any better to me now than it had before, and after that beer I had felt renewed enough to get up and find somewhere else to eat, but then the women sat, and there we all still were, our cigarettes spooling out smoke into the same air, the air we all breathed. The four of us watched the nothingness of the lake, connected in that way, if no other.

I picked up the menu, and seeing me, the waiter surprised me by asking if I was hungry for something. I opened my mouth, but no words filled the space, and then I said the only thing that came to mind. The word, Cheeseburger. I had not said please, or may I—I did not have time—and now I could not look out past the women, the prettiest one might look back, and her fiery silver Czech eyes would meet mine, those of a boorish American, someone who flies to the far side of the earth to eat the kind of food he eats every day at home. I lit a cigarette and watched the tip burn away.

The women were gone when the cheeseburger arrived, and with it a bottle of Hellman's ketchup, something that I was sure was wrong, even as I read the label, an image built by my own inaccurate mind. The cheeseburger itself was merely strange, a spongy patty of unknowable meats and caraway seeds on a microwaved bun. But the cheese was right. Processed American, which did not flood me with nostalgia. I ate half of it, pushing the rest and the pile of mushy crinkle fries to the edge of the table. There. I have killed another hour, and I am that much closer to home.

I was on my feet and moving, and I stopped suddenly before I crossed the road, aware that I did not know where I was going. I went to smoke, but the pack was gone. I turned around, toward the Albatros patio, and there, in the next batch of chairs over,

was Raja Ferjani, looking my way. If I had turned even a little to my left I'd have seen her.

I went to her and she laughed at me, and I could see that she had been watching me watch the other women, and that she'd been in the audience to my whole opera of embarrassment over the cheeseburger. Raja said, I'd lost all hope you'd return to me.

I've concluded my search, I said.

For?

The worst hamburger in the world.

Right there? The way you ordered it I thought you'd had it on your mind for weeks.

Now you know, I said.

Raja said, I thought surely you were going to go talk to those girls. The one in the pink top kept looking at you.

I guess I just wasn't feeling... I said, What's the opposite of shy?

Raja said, Confident I suppose.

That's not quite it. I guess I'm more in the mood to say goodbye than hello. Or was, until I saw you spying on me.

Sit with me, won't you, Raja said.

Where's Gerald? I said and took a chair.

Raja said, Scuba diving, on one of those dreadful guided tours. He said he'd apologized about the other night—is this not so? You look worried he might be hiding in the lake.

I'm sure he apologized, I said. That I don't remember it shouldn't be any indicator.

He did say it was awfully late, and that you might have been more on the side of insobriety.

I prefer the term oblivion. It's such a pretty word, I said.

Raja said, See, there—something beautiful came out of your mouth. On the side of oblivion, on the side of tomorrow.

Now you said that. And it sounds so much nicer coming out of yours.

Raja and I became drunk together on the patio of the café next to Albatros, whose name we never learned. Raja picked apart the block of feta in her Greek salad, and we accumulated a stock of empty Mythos bottles and tiny beer glasses which we neglected and, like the bottles, the waiter did not think to clear. Raja said she had never drunk so much beer in her life as she had on Crete, and she patted her stomach, which did move under the satiny blue star pattern of her dress when she touched it, but only a little. She joked that it was as though she was addicted, and then she drained her beer and lit one of my cigarettes, which I'd retrieved from the table at Café Albatros, next to the husk of my cheeseburger, on a plate which was never taken away in however many hours Raja and I sat together. It was easy to be forgetful of other things with her, and she laughed often, even at the unfunniest of things I said, and

when I told her I thought she was not a very good judge of character if she was entertained by me, she agreed. She said she'd never gotten it right about anyone yet. But she said again how glad she was that we'd run into one another again, and to hear her say so was like stepping into a green field.

It turned out we were to share the same flight back to London, with almost every Briton at the hotel, such was the schedule of international flights from the Heraklion airport, and I did not mention my plan for leaving sooner. I could feel the resolve slipping away, but knew to hold it in, that if I so much as said I was thinking of an early departure, the first job of any pretty girl was to get me to reconsider, whether she meant it or not. You could not look at her too much, could not breathe her same air too much. It was too easy to fling myself on the grenade of all of my old habits. Even the way she talked about London was different from anything I'd heard from anyone who lived there—perhaps it was because she'd been born in France, but she spoke of her adopted city in the same way I saw it, like a rich and living document of an empire past sunset. Raja said she was looking forward to going home, but not a return to reality, and I said I was sorry, because either I did not remember what she did for a living, or I had never even asked.

I'll never tell, she said. That way I shall forever be mysterious to you.

But you know what I do, I said.

Of course, she said and joked, An undertaker, correct?

I laughed and waited for the clever answer to come from my mouth, but then there was only quiet, and we both lit cigarettes.

She grinned. She said, We were in a little town on the Katharo Plateau the other day and I saw a cemetery, and I remembered what you told me about the headstones, and why sometimes they tip over—about how the earth is alive under the surface.

I told you that? I'm so boring I don't even remember, I said.

Don't you? she said. You made a joke—it was when I knew I really liked you.

What was the joke?

You said that the phenomenon with a part of the earth moving one direction below another was called graveyard creep, Raja said. And then you said that that's what you thought you were—that you should put it on your calling card, Alex Kiesig, Graveyard Creep.

It isn't much of a joke, I said.

She said, Maybe I liked that I thought you were trying to be funny for me.

You're remarkably kind, I said.

Raja made an evil grin and blew smoke from both corners of her mouth. She said, So have you found what you were looking for?

I told you I did, I said. That hamburger was really elusive.

Seriously, she said and took my wrist in her hand.

I said, What about you?

She exhaled and let me go. It's never simple, is it?

No.

Don't you think that that's all there is. Like we spend our whole lives chasing after more money, more interesting jobs and friends and lovers. I don't know. More adventure. And then suddenly, it's like a switch, and all you want is for things to be simple again. Like you wake up one day and realize you haven't talked to any of your friends in years, that all anyone cares about is how soon you produce grandchildren. And I don't particularly feel like having grandchildren for someone else, but what's the alternative—do this whole thing over again with someone else?

I sipped my beer, measuring the strength within me to stay in my seat. She was a very pretty girl, and I knew what a very pretty girl could do with her words and with their well-placed touches, how their sounds and smells could make you think of things you'd never thought before. Sometimes I felt that women like Emma and Raja had been given maps of all the men in the world. That they could read mine and every other man's legend while we could not. I said, It's been the way of things for a long time. I don't think there's any chance you or I will be able to change it.

Raja said, But isn't that so terribly dreadful? Every time two people meet, what gets set into motion is the beginning of the end.

The alternative is being alone, I said.

Is that what you've decided to be? Raja said.

It's all I've come up with, I said. No one's ever gone to Crete because they couldn't stand being alone.

No, Raja said. Only insanely romantic fools would come here, with their foolish ideas. Whyever is it so difficult when someone else is involved?

Like Gerald?

Or like Emma, Raja said.

I said, I didn't come here in the hopes of making things the way they used to be. I remember how things used to be.

But you were in love with her, she said.

There's a difference between that and being happy.

Too true. I think mine was the other way around—very happy, not necessarily in love. I'm such a goddamned happy person, Raja said. We had moved closer together, our chairs facing, and we both leaned the same way toward the table, cigarettes held just over the ashtray, the forgotten long ends of both needing to be ashed. Raja stopped herself, and for both of us the rest of the world reappeared—the café, the lake, the sky. She turned around, looked at nothing and reached for her sunglasses, when nothing had changed at all in the light, and she said, Good God, listen to me, with not a shred of discretion.

I reached across her for her empty beer bottle, tried to find her eyes behind the dark lenses to pull her back to me, and I said, It looks like we've run out.

She dropped her purse on her lap and dug through it. I have a date, she said.

I suppose I do, too, I said and remembered Emma's invitation to the raki bars.

Raja aimed her face to me, but the sunglasses were like shields, and I looked at her mouth instead of her eyes when she spoke, and she said, When you remember me, imagine me prettier and younger and not at all resigned to anything.

Impossible, I said.

No, really, she said. Make something up. Something exciting.

Okay, I said. I'll create a good lie for us.

Good.

Then you must also promise to misremember me, I said.

I stood up, and held out my hands for her to take, and she took them and had the full length of her blue satin dress against me. I pulled her close, and I kissed her cheek, then nosed in under her hair and kissed her ear, I had gone too far, and I could feel her tense against me, but then she pressed her cold nose into my neck and breathed down my shirt like a sigh. I didn't say anything.

We pulled apart and she still had her arms looped around me and I asked if she wanted to share a taxi back to the hotel, and she said no. She whispered, and it was a tone of conspiracy I knew so well. She said in a voice like one that's almost cracking to tears, No one will ever know the truth.

At the hotel I sat at one of the tables on the far side of the swimming pool. It was the same row of stone seats where I had seen the boy Connor and his father playing tic-tac-toe, under a trellis wrapped in wiry vines and white flowers, now buzzing with dark mud-red wasps. They had yellow insignias on their heads that looked like they'd been painted on by tiny hands, and they had curling yellow stingers at the tip of a pulsing bonnet, like no insect I had ever seen, and they were two inches long, at least, and fat. Two wasps fell from the vines to the blue table in front of me,

tangled up in each other, eating each other's faces, hissing, red cellophane wings slapping the stone, drunk on nectar, drunk on love. Nothing could be more simple.

FROM THE WINDOW came the faint light of the disappeared sun, a reflection on the sky of the light that was already gone, and I was awake in my bed in all my clothes, and cold. From Emma's room came music, *Going Out Music*, and I shivered and got myself to the kitchenette sink and drank three warm glasses of water from the tap. I was sober again, a strange set of conditions. I touched my swollen eyes, and something rattled in my head behind my right eye, high up in my brainpan, and I smoothed my hair down from where it lay greased into a fan on the side of my face. But the overhead light was not as splitting as it had once seemed, cut through with twilight, and I realized what was wrong—I felt great. I had experienced the occasionally gifted hangover pass once before. It could have been food or rest or something else, but I was not going to question it. I went into the other room, the pulse of a nightclub, and Emma was kneeling on the floor in front of the vanity.

I thought you were dead, Emma said and smiled. She wore only a pair of my boxer shorts and a sheer black brassiere, and her hair was wet but her makeup was done, and she looked like she'd come right up from a mermaid pool just to smile at me like that. I had been carrying around my new knowledge, and the secret that I was going to leave, but now she was looking at me like she had when she was my girl, and I felt mean, no matter how things had been or how she had been. I had to tell her.

The raki will have to try much harder to get me than the beer, I said.

Are you already pissed? she said and faked motherly awe. She stood and slapped the back of her hairbrush to her thigh. On the vanity was a bottle of retsina and a glass.

I feel amazing, actually, I said. And you look like you're well on your way.

Now the shock faded, and her eyes turned truly sad. You don't even want to go out tonight, she said. You've made some other plans.

No, I said. What makes you think that?

She came close, vanilla perfume and the dusk of her nipples through the bra. She said, Just please tell me if you don't want to go out with me tonight.

Of course I do, I said. I'm going to take a quick shower while you do your hair.

You're hiding something, she said.

I said, You know everything there is to know about me.

I dug through my suitcase to the last clean clothes at the bottom, cool and damp feeling from the sea air and heavily creased, and I went past Emma again on my way to the bathroom, and she was moving her head through the jet of her hairdryer. I showered and shaved, scraping through a heavy black growth that looked like metal filament in the sink and whorled away in the drain. To get ready to go out, I made myself as presentable as I could, and looked myself in the eye to make sure I could do what I needed to do. It is self-defense to forget. There would be plenty of alcohol, as many chances as I could take to do and say something damaging. I felt suddenly

hollow, choked up, and swallowed it down and smoothed the creases of my shirt. I went into her room and stood on the other side of the bed from her.

Where'd this music come from? I said.

Some bloke from the hotel loaned it to me, Emma said.

This is definitely your music, I said.

He loaned that to me, too, actually, Emma said. He was telling me about some club he'd been to in Ibiza and said I absolutely had to hear this. It's brilliant, isn't it? You hate it, don't you.

Hate's a strong word, I said. But you know me—I prefer the Beatles or Elvis Costello.

Well you'll be tortured no longer, she said. I'm ready.

I cannot say that the version of her that appeared before me then was the most beautiful she had ever been, because I know to say so causes so much else to be brought into comparison—and there were so many other times I had thought so, times when she was tremendously happy or tremendously in love with me, and other times, when I saw her driving her car in Boise from across the intersection and she didn't know I was looking, or when she woke up in the morning, or when she was drunk and crying about how sad it was that anyone would ever want to kill John Lennon. And I know to say that she was the most beautiful now calls into question my own ability to judge then, or even now as I view it through this dubious lens. But I know she was very much herself, and I felt that somehow everything had shifted, that now I was in control and was going to be the one to say goodbye to her, but she did not know.

You look nice, she said, shy as something she did not want to admit.

You always look nice, I said.

Hardly, she said and showed me her tongue, a normal pink tongue, one I'd had in my mouth a thousand times. She said, My face is absolutely green.

Nothing a night of hard drinking won't cure, I said.

Let's, she said.

AT THE LOBBY Emma asked for a taxi and stood by me as we waited, as though we were really together, her face brightly made up and with her hair up and in a black dress, and me looking like I'd worn my only good clothes to a history conference. And she was smiling in the taxi as we came over the hill toward Elounda's lit hotels with their unreal marine blue pools. In the air was the feeling of anticipation in our night and a strong lust for nostalgia, and Emma said she was so glad I was coming with her to the raki bars, that this was the most truly Cretan experience I could have. She asked the driver to take us into Elounda and to Lotus Eaters, one of the restaurants we had passed on our way to the beach. I was excited by the idea of food.

I didn't think we were eating, I said.

My dear, we'd never make it, Emma said. We must fortify ourselves.

We pulled up in front of the restaurant and Emma paid and before I could get out, she grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back into the cab. She looked at me, her eyes so much like the light from hotel pools, and said, I'm sorry, and I looked

down at my stomach to see if her other hand had shoved a dagger into my guts, but her hand was flat on my thigh, and she let me go and we got out of the taxi.

We ate on the patio of Lotus Eaters in the warm wind of the Elounda lagoon, and the restaurant was busy but things moved at a different pace in Elounda. We moved into it, too. A string of paper lanterns was hung between the two red wood posts at each end of the patio, low in the middle of the wire, right next to us, and the lamps looked like they were all coming to land at our table. On the posts, little speakers, playing classic rock. We drank wine together and did so with ceremony, toasting Crete, our time there, each other. Emma ordered us a plate of domalthes—pickled grape leaves stuffed with ground lamb and rice. And then she had short spaghetti called youvetzi in scant tomato sauce with the occasional lucky knuckle of lamb, and I had alright swordfish steak with green beans straight out of the can, and Emma and I laughed at the french fries. She said she'd forgotten. She said, The food here is absolute shit, isn't it?

I laughed.

How did I not have any idea? Emma said.

Everybody rewrites their own history, I said. You loved Crete, and so you remember the food fondly.

Emma looked out at the water, and over the stereo came Waterloo Sunset. Emma turned to me and said, I did love it here. But everyone's gone. So am I.

We went through the town together and I let her show me the places I had already seen. We could walk to the raki bars, it wasn't far, she said, and pointed past

the church tower to a small copse of lights clustered on the hill. But in no time we were in the dark streets of the residential part of Elounda, where there was not even the sound or flicker of television to anchor us in the reality of our modern world, and we passed homes lit by candles and red lamps that seemed to emit no light. Emma said there was a back way, and I did not know there was a front way, but she had forgotten the shortcuts and we walked through people's yards and across their patios, our arms brushing through high weeds. Behind us, Elounda was a watery neon smudge on an unending black canvas. We went under an old swingset, and through a pile of shattered pots, and each thing appeared to us in the darkness first only as a blackness in the blue, and then a form, and then revealed itself to us only as we came upon it. I stepped in one broken urn, and I recognized the shape and decoration of a larnax, and then I saw that I was on a mound of crushed larnakes, the burial urns emptied and forgotten. In one yard, Emma said she had to pee, and I pointed to a bush. I lit a cigarette and turned to see a man in his undershirt on his patio, alone in the dark, and together we listened to Emma pee in his back yard. A dog's sharp bark sent me and Emma up through a winding street lined by homes, and at last we had found the main path. Our footfalls on the stone.

We climbed a stairwell and emerged at the top of a platform in the middle of a little town, somehow hidden from Elounda down below on the hill except for the lights, and all the houses were rectangles set into the mountain glowing in the moonlight. This was Mavrikiano, Emma told me, and she took me by the hand down another blue alley.

At last, here we are, Emma said and we'd come to two more boxes, with large porchlights and open front doors from which came music and voices, and it was just these two little buildings and everything else around us was dark. Just these? I said. And Emma said she had told me we were going to the raki bars, and here they were, one, two raki bars. Emma said she'd peed on the hill because neither bar had a bathroom, and she pointed to the sad clapboard outhouse between the buildings, precarious on the slope. She took me to the one on the right, whose door had no sign, and we walked through a harshly lit arcade into a bright tiled room, our shoes echoing like stones in a cavern, and Emma whispered to me that this was no good at all. The music was a lilting new age piano and a flute. There was no one else in the room, and our eyes took a moment to adjust to the light echoing off every wall and the stainless steel fixtures, and I said to her that it looked like this was the bathroom. She said we'd try to slip out, and as we turned around, the owner saw us from the other room through his huge eyeglass goggles, and Emma saw him, and then we were stuck. Emma led me to one of the new, linoleum-topped tables near the open door to the patio, the glow of Elounda below the balcony's horizon, and the very old man shuffled toward us with a carafe of raki and two small glasses. Then he came out with a plate of tomato wedges and salty boiled potato, another of peeled cucumber, and another of rich, dark bread crusts drizzled in olive oil and smelling of thyme. Emma rolled her eyes. The man sat at another little table, and his wife joined him, facing us from across the room, and we all sat in the quiet sterile light. We're going to be entombed here, Emma said in a low tone and poured the raki into the shot glasses. She said, They're never going to let us go.

It's like that everywhere here, I said. It's like if you want to have a meal, they use you as free advertising that you've chosen their restaurant.

Emma pushed a glass toward me. She said, That's Manoli. He's worn that same jumper for about two hundred years.

You remember it, I said.

I do, she said. Cheers.

Cheers. The raki was better, it was true. This was like warm oil in my insides, in my engine, and I was aware of my restraint slipping away, of urges borne from beyond this time. Me and Emma and booze had converged yet again. We drank it fast, and I asked if I should get more, and Emma said, Shhh. She said the next place was much better, and she popped a potato into her mouth, lay some drachmas on the table and we waved and nodded to Manoli, and his sweater did look to be from some forgotten civilization, and I felt sorry for him that we didn't like how he'd remodeled his bar.

That was terrible! Emma said.

It was the best tomato I've had in years, I said.

Bloody tomato, she said. As if that were why we came here.

She took me to the next place, under a yellow painted sign on which there was much Greek, and then, at the bottom, in English, See The Landscape Of Elunda From Our Balcony. And then, Coffee House The Hope. That's new, Emma said.

In here was an old Greek kitchen under weak white light, with white walls and kelly green painted cabinets and a seafoam green island, a sink full of dishes, bottles

of red wine and retsina and olive oil and vinegar, tins of Nescafé with their jagged lids peeled open, the shelves lined with fruit-printed paper. There was nothing to make you think you weren't in someone's home, no cash register or advertising of any kind, and there was only one little seagreen table with yellow chairs the same color as the sign outside, and at the table sat an old man with a toothless smile, smiling so big his eyes were nearly closed, and behind him on the wall was a board to which had been pinned photos, and all of them were of people posing with the old man, and above the board was a much older portrait of the man himself from when he was younger, a painting that cast him under a halo of white. On the wall, the first clock I had seen since England. He lifted a knobby hand to Emma and she said, Hello Mikali, and he waved us through to the balcony.

And neither on the balcony was there evidence that this was someone's business, as there sat a small old grill and a couple of pots and a bag of soil from a forgotten gardening project. There were two more green tables, and we sat in the yellow chairs at the one closest to the concrete rail, and over us was a single unromantic buglight reflecting off the blank white outside wall, and behind us a ramshackle trellis on which was stretched a single sickly brown vine.

I love it, I said.

I know, Emma said.

I think the old man in there is as old as the other one's sweater, I said.

Mikali? You're probably right. Best behavior, Emma said. Here he comes.

The old man moved caneless to us with a tin of nuts he placed on the table, and the tin was the same as the ashtray that was already there. Raki, he said to Emma and she nodded, and he looked to me and I nodded, too, and he said, Raki, raki, and went inside.

Are you in any of the photos in there? I said.

No, Emma said. I'm no longer even a memory here.

I'm sorry, I said.

It's alright, she said and sat up brightly. I'm alright, she said.

I'd take a picture of you, I said.

I didn't bring a camera, she said.

Neither did I, I said.

It's going to be awfully difficult to remember what's about to happen, Emma said.

And what's that?

Just see. Ooh, Emma said. I should tell you that's the same batch of musty old monkey nuts from about fifteen years ago.

Mikali set a carafe and two glasses on the table and went back inside. It seemed right to say something, that we should revel in the ceremony of what I knew to be our last night out together, but I didn't want to tell her quite yet that this would be the last. I poured the raki and held up my glass. She lifted hers. I could see what was

going to become of us as soon as I took this drink, and I waited a little too long to say anything.

Do you want me to do it? she said.

I don't know, I said.

I will, she said. I've got something to say.

Okay.

Emma said, Well, first things first, thank you for coming here tonight when I know it's the last thing you wanted to do.

I opened my mouth and she stopped me with her open hand.

No, please, allow me to go on, she said. You don't know how much it has meant for me to see you again and know that you are well. I was really pleased that you came with me actually because I didn't think that you would. I always thought that we would end up together, mostly because I didn't think I would ever meet anyone who could compete with you. But, well, we both know. I know I've managed to hurt you yet again, but please know that these last few days have been very hard on me, too. I hate the idea of you going off with other women, but I suppose I deserve it. Anyway.

Emma, I said.

Just know that I am so very truly sorry for everything, Emma said.

Me too, I said.

It makes such a difference to me that you didn't leave early, like you said on the beach in Elounda that day, Emma said.

I wouldn't have, I said.

Emma looked at her raki and laughed. She said, Are we going to drink this or not?

Wait, I said.

What for?

I have to say something, I said.

What?

Emma, I said and looked at her, our glasses floating in space between us, and I said, I want you to know I always told you the truth when I told you how much I love your hair.

Even when I look like John the Baptist? You're ridiculous, she said.

I'll cheers to that, I said. We clicked glasses.

We drank. Here even the raki was better, and I told her so, and we smoked and drank the rest of the carafe.

And she was right, it was not going to be easy to remember. So often now I think I have never woken up, that the light over the rooftops is an illusion and I am still in the previous day, or week, or month, and I have to look at my clothes or the stamp on the back of my hand to remember what I've done. Time to me has become less a line than a honeycomb, and any memory I have is no longer the sequential

inevitability of that which preceded it, but merely a pod that is formed by the walls of the other pods where other memories are housed, and so sometimes I can't remember things because I cannot get to those pods, as I do not know which pods touch each other, which thing I associate with which thing. At that moment on the balcony of Coffee House The Hope, the process of one second turning into the next burst open like a disturbed hive, and I can only tell you what took place not as I remember it but as it must have been, the way one thing must have led to another.

We drank more raki, at least two more carafes, and then we each drank Amstels in double-sized bottles. I see the label coming off between my thumb and forefinger, hear her speaking, feel my eyebrows knot in frustration, sweaty. Hear the words wedding, knackered, squiffy.

More people came to the balcony, and she knew some and not others, and before long the two tables were pushed together and we were all drinking and talking, and before me was a large man with a red beard—a ginger beard, Emma would say—and his mouth moving, the music of all of our voices in agreement. Most were English expats. They were Bert and Hannah and John and Sue and George and Sue, a man whose skin rank of boozey sweetness, a beautiful dark woman, a scholarly man with his eyeglasses on a chain around his neck. They talked about raki, how it was much better than what they sell in town at the Camelot Bar, home of Wild Eye the watermelon salesman. They talked about the horrific improvements next door, and the man with the ginger beard said, Old avaricious bastard. At the end of the table was a silver-haired woman with a strong, stern, ruddy, familiar face and I kept trying to look at her to see what about her made her seem so recognizable. I hear her tell Emma that

she is Swiss, and I see suddenly the face of my great-grandfather, see all at once my own face as though I have found it in a history book or carved into stone.

Mikali shuffled to us with more musty monkey nuts and raki, but when he was not fast enough, one of the British ladies from the table went in to the fridge and got some more. I cannot see her face, but there is something that tells me she has survived a fire, an oddity of movement that her face does not have, hidden deep in her makeup. She brought me a beer, and I told her she was too kind, and she kissed me on the cheek and said I was the handsomest thing to grace that patio in ten years. She said she was glad that Emma'd brought me here instead of that Australian, and I nodded dumbly and said, Yeah.

Everyone was talking and I became self-conscious of my full ashtray. I was drunk and my feet were restless. I'd been tapping one heel for some time to the beat of some faint pulse from down in Elounda. Then I heard Emma say, You're joking, and I listened and heard this:

Michalis's own father.— The old man at Evangelia's? — The self-same, I'm telling you. — Evangelia's husband? — Yes, are you paying attention, it was Spiros Daskolakis, Evangelia's husband, Michalis's father. — Dead? — Yes, didn't you see the bloody funeral? — Michalis just got married the other day. — It was at the wedding. — What was at the wedding? — It was at the wedding what his father got killed. — Killed? — Shot to death. — It was probably Michalis himself, that shotgun he always carries around in the back of his truck. —

And then there was silence, and the man with the large ginger beard—or was he a large man with a ginger beard—closed his eyes and nodded and everyone at the table gasped.

He said, Right after the ceremony Michalis and the whole wedding party were driving through Ag Nik and Michalis is in the back of his truck with his whole family, and he's had a bit to drink as you could imagine, and he gets the shotgun from inside the cab and starts shooting it into the air. And I guess one of the shots ricocheted off a wall or a lamppost or something, coz all of the sudden, the old man collapses.

Now the crowd booed and made raspberry noise, laughing that Jerry really had them going for a second. He insisted that what he'd told them was true. I told him I believed him—that I'd seen the funeral and someone told me it was an old man shot at his own son's wedding, but by then everyone was already talking about other things.

And then it was late, and it was me and Emma alone at the tables again. I am shaking my head and saying something to Emma, and she is saying, No you don't, you don't mean it.

And then—Hello, Emma, said a man with a Cockney accent in the doorway. We turned to him. He wore a mustard-colored fisherman's sweater and was smoking a black cigarette, and he had a large moustache. A bottle of beer stuck out the front pocket of his jeans.

Hello, Mitch, Emma said to him. He swung a chair out from inside the bar and sat with us. They caught up, and I went inside and filled an Amstel bottle with water from the tap and came back out. Mitch had come to Crete on vacation ten years ago

and never left. He told Emma the story of Maarten and his brother. Some Greeks had bought The Dutch Bar from them and turned it into a disco. Maarten went back to Holland. His brother was caught on a cruise with marijuana and was now rotting away in a Turkish prison. No one had visited. No one had sent a letter. Emma said that she'd heard they don't have toilet paper in Turkey, and I reached for Emma's wrist because I was sure she was going to cry, but she was even, perhaps stoic, and I lit a cigarette instead. Emma was laughing. Charming. She spoke in low tones. The volume saved for secrets. I smoked and drank my bottle of water. She left for a minute to brave the outhouse and Mitch asked me how I knew Emma.

She was my girlfriend a long time ago, I said. Now we're here.

He nodded. He said, But you're not the Australian, obviously.

No, I said. No. Wait—what do you mean?

Nothing, he said. I think I'm confused.

Okay, I said.

Emma returned and pried Mitch for news of the town. He told her things, stories which meant nothing to me. I went inside to pay Mikali, to get things going, and the Swiss woman had come back and was sitting with him under his collage. Mikali's face was on his shoulder and the woman had his hands in her hands.

You look like you're ready to leave, she said to me and my open wallet.

It's late, I said.

Do you know what you've had? she said.

No idea, I said and laughed.

I handed her five-thousand drachmas and she said it was enough, and she slipped it into Mikali's breast pocket. I leaned in over them, looking at all the pictures, and in every one of them was a young tanned face with Mikali's old one, on the balcony outside or out front with the sign, or in the very place in which I now stood. And then I saw her, and I realized that I was looking for her, a photograph of Emma sitting with Mikali. Not some relic of years ago, the waif with Suzy Quattro hair and yellow tongue, but the Emma I knew. And I knew that what I was hoping for was some piece of evidence. That what I had needed for so long was that one thing which would tell me not only that what we had was gone, but that it had never been true, that every memory I ever had was imagined. Here I am ten thousand miles away from home in a strange room in the middle of the night, drunk again, and I am still looking for proof. In this pod my heart is racing and my knees are buckling from under me by the force of a tremendous black wave. Another memory—I am signing the guest registry on my first night at Hera Village, and it is not my name printed in the book. In another, I am sitting on the luggage at Gatwick and absently playing with the tag, and I read the dates and they do not make sense to me, they are from a year ago, as if Emma has already gone on this trip without me. And now I hear Manolis asking me for my last name. He too has read the registry. It all makes sense to me now. I have distilled myself to the barest entity, and finally I am able to understand.

What I am looking for is a photograph of Emma and a man. The man with Emma is the Australian tennis player, on Crete with her. Here is Shane Hughes, for whom she left me. Whom she swore was never her boyfriend, that there was nothing

ever between them. That when she left America for England once and for all, she was leaving everything behind. But there will never be something so clear, there is no photograph, no way of knowing. I have come to Crete to discover the truth of us, I need to see it to know it. But there is no such thing.

Do you think I could pay for just one more raki, I said to the Swiss woman.

Dear, don't worry about it, she said and nodded to the bottle.

I stood in the middle of the patio with my shot glass and carafe and watched Emma talk to Mitch. She made big eyes and said, Tell me the really juicy bits. When he was finally quite drunk, Mitch went on his way and I helped Emma from her chair.

Everyone else is gone, I said. You can't stay here forever.

We walked back to the town.

She staggered into me many times. I caught her and hooked my arm around her waist. I'm really pissed, she laughed. Let's get a taxi back to the hotel and jump in the pool.

Whatever you want, I said and had to hold her up.

Brilliant, she said.

We found the road to town, longer and steeper than the direct path through yards, but better for stumbling into each other. We went down the hill and by another restaurant patio whose floor was nearly as steep as the hill, and there was a light on inside still, and we heard people speaking German, and on the stone wall before us was a fat black-and-white cat, oblivious as a cat can be. Before us, a trench of buildings and a dark road, the walls around us the color of old limes. We passed the

graffiti-sprayed roadsign that said the name of the town. Mavrikiano, I said to myself. Never forget, never forget, and four motorcycles shot past and nearly took us off our feet and blasted up toward the raki bars. It was not a long walk back to Elounda. Here a bright open-air hotel lobby blurred our vision. Little boats knocked against the promenade, all pink and periwinkle and salty sweet. We stood in the taxi queue across the street from Evangelia's. The old woman herself was sitting outside, her scowl forever set in the deep lines of her face, and seeing her made me smile, a character come to life from a photograph, as though I had known her years ago, too.

Another pod forms. I turn to Emma, and she is right next to me on the curb, her arm hooked around a metal pole. She dips her toe down to touch the street, as though she's testing water. She is drunk and I am drunk and I am full of the desire to smash things, windows, vases, headlights. I want to rip apart the wicker chairs on Evangelia's patio. Emma looks toward the church and its luminous cross, a kind of light that streaks through the night in our eyes, through the fans of the palm trees, through the patio of Friends Café, through the ghost-image of another English couple standing far away from us in the same taxi queue. I remember it because Emma never looked at me.

FUNERIAL

I PAID THE DRIVER at the hotel and we got out. The ride back had been a race. Each curve left my stomach behind and Emma laughed like it was a thrill ride. She went to the bar and I sat outside. I had an Assos. I listened to the music. The same songs. Cars hurried up and down the road. Places to go. Good times.

When I went inside, the man from the pool that morning was sitting next to her at the bar. The bar was more full of people than I had ever seen it. I stood dumbly behind Emma and the man. I looked around. I spotted Gerald at a table and he waved me over.

How are you holding up? he said.

I sat down. Assos?

No, thanks, he said. They are simply too vile. He pulled out a pack of Silk Cut and gave me one. He said, Have one of these. You'll feel much better. You've been hitting those quite hard.

Where's your girlfriend? I asked.

She's in bed, reading, Gerald said. He puffed, Said she was feeling under the weather today.

How has your trip gone? I asked lamely. I did not know Gerald any better than he knew me.

Gerald nodded. We've sorted things out. Yours?

Look to the bar.

Gerald shook his head. You have got to get a new girlfriend.

Manolis came to the table. He was wearing a shirt with bright yellow stripes. He set a shot glass before me. He patted my shoulder. Said, Feel better, my friend. Ouzo, on me. Be happy. He went back to the bar.

My new motto, I said.

Gerald tipped his beer to me. I clinked my glass to it. Cheers. We drank.

I turned to the bar to find Manolis for another one, and I saw Emma slip down from her stool and walk to me. The man from the pool was behind her. His wide smile over her shoulder. So many white teeth.

We're going to go for a swim, she said. This is the bloke I was telling you about, who brought by the stereo. He's a diplomat, and he's got a degree in swimming.

You do that, I said. The man was smiling at me, as though it made everything alright. They left.

You're just going to let her go?

I'm just going to let her go.

We could throw him over the edge. I know that would make me feel better. Or better, I hear the lake in Ag Nik is bottomless.

It's her choice, I said.

Well, we could throw her over, if that suits you.

I laughed a small laugh. I said, All of this has been my own fault.

Gerald told me we had to smoke some marijuana immediately. I got up. Tried to say something profound, to thank him for listening, being there. I offered to pay the bar tab. Gerald said no, and I followed him out the bar and down a path around the side of the hotel where I had never been, and we walked down a long slope toward the sea and an outpost of bungalows below the main hotel. We went into a circle of watery light cast from the pool snack bar above, and next to us was a massive cactus lolling in the wind, like a drunk ready to fight, with fist-petals and hairy knuckles and heavy pink-black fruit dangling over the horizon, and we watched it bob. Down here was a cluster of rooms with a courtyard in the center, and a gate, and we went through it and Gerald went into his room and I sat in the courtyard.

Through the open door I heard Raja's sleepy voice ask who Gerald was talking to outside, and I heard him say my name. Did Raja think of me right then, as I was thinking of her? Gerald came out with a plastic bag and papers, and we sat at the Cretan blue stone table in the lamplight from the hotel gardens, and Gerald asked me for my pack of cigarettes and tore off a tiny piece of cardboard and rolled it into a tube, and he tore open one of his own cigarettes and sprinkled the tobacco onto a paper and dashed the marijuana on top of it, and Gerald talked about how he hoped someone would turn my book into a movie and he would star in it, and I said that it was not that kind of book, and he said that I should change it. We smoked in front of Gerald's room with the door open and Raja laying in bed behind a half-open door in the darkness, and Gerald talked about Hollywood and how that was next, and he went to

the rail and looked down onto the beach and brought me over to see where there was a campfire and the van that Emma had mentioned once before. Gerald said, It really makes you think, you know? and I had no idea what he meant but said I thought he was right, and we shook hands, and he went in through the door of room #20 and I climbed back up past the cactus, alone again.

I looked to the sky as I walked back. The stars were kind to me tonight. They stayed in the same place, winked at me. Millions of dying flares.

At my room, I sat down on the bed and kicked off my shoes. She was not there. Sleep pushed me into the pillow.

I woke to a thud at the door. The lights were still on. When the door opened, it was her. She was dripping wet and wearing only her panties.

What an asshole, she said. She touched her forehead and I thought the thud might have been her stumbling into the door.

Where are your clothes?

She got into bed next to me and pulled the blankets up. She shivered and pushed her body into me. The sheets soaked through. Her skin was cool and prickled like gooseflesh. She said, That Belgian bloke tried it on.

Tried it on? What do you mean?

We're on holiday, nothing to worry about.

My fists closed tight. I leaped over her and out of bed, bare feet smacking the floor. Threw my legs into the khakis, rumbled across the room for my shoes.

Where are you going? she asked and the wet skin of her breasts and cold belly was against my back, unromantic and not aimed at me with intention, but right there nevertheless.

I couldn't make a word. My heart thumped in my chest.

No, don't, she said softly. She put her arms around me, pulled me to the bed. It was nothing, she said. Stay here with me. He just chased me around the pool a bit, is all.

This isn't right, I said and tried hard to stay sitting up, rigid with anger in khaki pants in a Greek hotel room with my half-naked ex-girlfriend just escaped from the pool and pawing me drunkenly, meaninglessly, thoughtlessly. I said to my khakied knees, Why won't you just be rid of me?

And at this Emma did not even flinch, just pulled the poolwater-spotted sheet around and over me, trying to tuck me in even as I sat still.

Emma laughed. Oh, you have a say, I'd suspect.

I'm not trying to be funny. This isn't a joke.

Just sleep here with me. I'm freezing. I need you here.

I'm going to have to kill him, I said. It's the only thing that makes any sense.

The Belgian? He's harmless, Emma said and then it was like a switch had been thrown, and she gave up on me, collapsing into the bed, her arms slack, and she said, I'm so tired of talking, I'm so tired, all you want to do is talk. I'm so tired.

I turned to her and her eyes were closed, her nipples still shocked cold.

Emma...

I'm so tired, it's too late, she said into the pillow, her open lips dragging against the cloth. She said, It's alright. We're alright. We'll be alright tomorrow, like we've always been alright, you and me.

No we're not, I said. I stared at my bright pink feet turning purple as I pressed them to the floor.

You know your problem? Emma said. You don't hate me, she said. If you did, you'd have shagged one of the prostitutes the night you went to the brothel.

I lay next to her, looked hard at the lids of her eyes. How do you know that I didn't? I whispered.

You always come back to me, she said and her breath was boozy and hot.

I slid my hand up the cool wall and found the lightswitch, and I settled down next to her, facing her but with our bodies laid out straight and apart, each of us long shapes in the immediate dark.

She touched my face and I opened my eyes and she was looking at me. Her thumb lingered on my chin. Her eyes burned blue like paper lanterns in the darkness, sober, sobering, steadied to seize this fleeting moment when she seemed to have something she needed to say. She nodded seriously, breathing hard like someone already in deep sleep. Said, I won't tell anyone that you don't hate me. Your secret is safe.

We closed our eyes to sleep and she sat up suddenly and plugged something into the wall. It was the chocolate air freshener. I said I hated the smell, and she said I was supposed to. It was to keep away the mosquitoes.

WITH NO SLEEP I was up early the next morning, and I followed my body through the shower, to the mirror, into clean clothes. With no sleep the texture of the white stucco wall stood out, and the cool water shocked my skin, and the sounds were still night sounds in the dark outside the bathroom window, still full of the energy of last night. I had come out of that strong current into sobriety, into the same night, with no sleep, staring at the wall and flexing my fingers as my whole left arm went numb under the pillow, under Emma's head. Now she made no move as I went through the room, and I stopped at the bed, at my bed, where she had slept with me, and touched her ear, and only after some time could I see her breathing in the darkness. In the bathroom mirror and the sharp light above it, my skin looked cold as packed meat, and I could see with my new raw eyes every line in my skin, the root of each hair. Then I felt sure that I had seen this before, the reflection of the bungalow behind me framed by the mirror in just that way, the smell of jasmine on the breeze and disinfectant on the tile, me remembering thinking about the texture of the wall, the feel of the water, the tingle of my fingers, remembering the guilt of watching Emma sleep while I touched her ear. This ghost memory warmed me because I knew I had never been here before in this moment, but what I felt was the familiar unease of rising in the same night as the one that had guided me to bed, and I knew how sharp every edge became in sleepless morning, how hungry I looked and was, because this was the way

I felt every time I had to get up too early for a new job, or a predawn flight, or a funeral. The feeling is that you will never forget any detail of this moment, everything is caught in such specific focus, but the truth is that your senses can only take in so much, and that in hours or a day you will hardly remember the moment at all. It was the short last part of the previous night for me, but for everyone else it was the start of something else in a new day.

In the hotel restaurant I looked at the menu but could not eat, and asked for coffee. I sat still, and the many guests in for breakfast this early—more than I had seen before—were hushed and conspiratorial around their eggs and maps of ruins. The windows were pulled in against the early chill, and the waitress with the blonde bobbed hair wore a cardigan over her apron and crossed her arms tight against herself every time she had her hands free. Across the bay the neon lights of Aghios Nikolaos were receding into new daylight from the still unseen sun, and the unpretty squawk of a single sea bird in low flight over the tiny island in the bay helped me find it over the water, lit in white outline by the pulse of the island's night beacon. I did not know what I was going to do to the Belgian swimmer when I saw him, but the wide scales of slate that made up the restaurant floor looked unforgiving enough. After the initial surprise of having been punched to the stone set in, after his skull clicked when it struck the floor, and he looked up at me and touched his bloody mouth, that moment would present plenty of options. I could beat him until he stopped moving. Or if he got up to make a run at me, I could use his own weight and throw him through the window and out into the abyss of the universe. I was open. I was not going to rule anything out.

I had gotten up and dressed last night as soon as I heard Emma's breathing change and knew her to be asleep, and I smoked and stomped up and down the paths of the hotel, with no guess even as to where the Belgian may be, until enough of the alcohol and rage had cooked away that I went back to the room and eased out of my clothes and up into Emma's flesh and stared at the back of her ear and flexed my hand and readied myself for murder, free of the adrenaline that discovery can ignite.

The Nescafé arrived but the water was too hot to drink, and I asked for a glass of icewater, not thinking to ask for a bottle. The girl brought it to me and I drank it fast, a waterfall into an underground cavern. I realized why the Greeks drank water from bottles. I drank the Nescafé but it was not strong enough, and I asked the waitress for Turkish coffee.

There were Russians sitting at two tables they'd pulled together in the middle of the room, the concerned doctor slumped back in his chair, and Leonid sat at the end, again in his short-sleeved purple shirt, open to the chest to reveal the sores on his neck like bubble-gum-colored mushrooms. The glow of goodwill from when I had first met Leonid, after returning from the Poseidon, had gone, and I had not spoken to the man again although I often saw him and the other Russians around the hotel and in the towns. I would never speak to him again.

I am bones and skin and hair and a dozen fluids, and all of those fluids are at high roil—my eyes are full of stomach acid, and the flesh under my eyes is swollen with bile, and my blood is coffee, and my skin is floating on icewater, and my sweat is blood. I have slept with the same contact lenses in my eyes for a month. The back of my hand tastes like salt. The crust cooked into the corners of my eyes is like

something scraped from an oven floor. But this was just my body reacting, and only when I made myself think of the Belgian and what he might have done to Emma, and when I did not feel like making myself think of it anymore, I asked the waitress for the bill and got up to leave.

You are going so soon? said someone, and I turned to see Manolis, and he looked not quite like I had pictured him. Though it had only been a day or so since I had last seen him, it felt like forever. In my mind, his accent had become more pronounced, and he had become comically heavy, like a character on Mexican television. But he spoke well, and of course he had never been fat. It was his eyes that had fooled me, but now also I thought it must have been his wide mouth, and the roundness of his face that had made him into someone else in his absence.

You're up early, I said and shook his hand.

I am always here, he said. Today is my day to help mother in the kitchen.

I smiled and said, I didn't know you could cook. I mean, I saw you with the pig, but cooking in a restaurant is an entirely different affair.

Manolis laughed. I must tell you, I am useless. I burn things. I cut myself. Manolis showed me his hand, with a big bandage around his thumb. He said, Mother says she needs me to be of assistance, but it is a lie. But I do not mind. It reminds me of when I am little boy, he said and I smiled at his slip of speech.

Manolis put his hands on his hips. We stood there, grinning a little but with nothing else to say. The waitress brought the bill, and Manolis shook his head and said, no, I would not pay today, and he looked at the ticket, and said that I needed to

have something more than just coffee. I told him not to worry, but he pushed me back into my chair, and I laughed. The girl had been waiting at the table to see if Manolis really did not want for me to pay, and now she laughed too, and Manolis sent her away.

Wait one minute, he said. I promise you, I will not cook it.

I lit a cigarette and unlatched the window and pushed it out a little, and there was a rush of sound with the cool air, the sound of surf and the rocks and sand that water moved. I smoked. I had never planned to see the Aegean Sea. But in years since, I have come to see it again, and even to this day when I see morning come over water I compare it to the water of Mirabello Bay, and mostly the present somehow does not fare well.

Try these, Manolis said and set a plate in front of me, on which were a half-dozen golden dumplings in light and dark syrups and powdered with what smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg. Manolis patted me on the shoulder and said, They are made with real honey of Crete. Very nutritious. Mother makes these only once or twice a month.

Thank you, I said and when he left I was aware only of the strong feeling I had of goodwill for my friend Manolis, and I stayed in it, in the moment, without comparing it to other goodwill, and without leaving that feeling to consciously wish that it would not end. The dumplings were fried pieces of dough, crispy on the outside and gooey and underdone on the inside and totally delicious, and the honeyed syrups were sweeter than anything I would usually eat, but I mopped up as much as I could with the dumplings. They were like little fried balls of honey. I could not think of

anything else to call them. When Manolis returned, I asked him what they were, and maybe expected something in Greek, or something in his prophetic stunted English, like the mythology of the word mellifluous, a sentence I would be left to decode for all time, but he said only, Honey balls. And we both laughed. Outside the sun was in its morning twilight.

I went back to the room and stepped inside, and Emma lay still asleep. I moved to the table where she'd left her handbag. Inside were the grapes she'd taken from the last raki bar, and I pulled off a cluster, pinching the stem off in my fingertips. Emma moved. Alex, she said.

Go back to sleep, I whispered as I slipped toward the door. The sun was coming up fast, and I popped a grape in my mouth.

Stay, she said to the wall.

When she did not say anything else, I pulled the door closed.

I went at the stone bench on the landing overlooking the pool, in the same garden lights that had lit my blacked out hunt for the Belgian, and as soon as I sat down, the hotel kittens were upon me, teeth needles on my fingertips, razorclaws hooked into the legs of my jeans from which they dangled and looked at me as though I had hung them there. Already the first arc of sun was up, a bright platter's crisp rim. It came from beneath the hills on the horizon instead of from the ocean itself, not straight out to the east as I had thought. But that could only mean that I had not known true east to begin with. There was no time for that line of thought, as more of the sun came up, and I smoked and ate grapes and threw grapes to the kittens, who at

first pounced upon them but were quick to lose interest, and sunlight brought color to the gardens of the hotel. Have one, I said. Go right ahead.

Below me the overhang of the veranda was wrapped in a cloudy tangle of vines which I had not noticed before, sprayed with white flowers, and the light filled the spaces between the vines like the mist that suspends the lace of a ceremonial veil. Ahead of me, coiled in the branches of the dead applewood was a flower with marked vaginal petals, and I watched it go from dark gray to Prussian blue to bright purplish red. I remembered something one of my students said, reciting something she had read in a book of mortuary science, and though her face had long ago receded into the pack of heads of the past, I could hear her words as proud and convincing as when she had first said them, announcing to the class, The womb is a hard and compact muscle mass that is the organ most reticent to decay.

In the bay, a huge white block of a ship moved toward the harbor, like a Greek hotel that had slipped from the shore, trailing ribbons of white water lit by the new sun. The foam seemed to harden into lines like carved ice, then sink as though melting just as suddenly as they had formed. A tiny scow steamed ahead toward the white block cruise ship, on a line to smash into it just as the block passed the krikri island. The whole sun was up, and it was morning, saved from melodramatic beauty by a clean and clear sky. It was the first sunrise I had seen in years, and like the last one, whenever that had been, the only reason I had been awake to see it was not because I had gotten up, but that I was still up. I threw the skeleton of the grape cluster into the garden, and one white cat flew stiff-legged after it, and when I stood

and swept the cats off my legs, the boats in the bay were passing each other instead of colliding, and each trumpeted their long low horns.

Almost to the room, I turned back. I remembered that when Manolis had taken the bill, I had left nothing for the waitress, and I was struck with the need to no longer let things slip away, to make right anything in its own moment, to keep Manolis's gesture alive. I went down the stairs and through the arcade into the restaurant.

I did not see the waitress. There was another girl I did not recognize, and she looked doubtfully at me standing in the entry, then turned to take the order of her table, two men next to the window at the same table where I had been sitting. They both wore polo shirts, and the one facing the exit, and me, rubbed his hands together and down his face, and looked as rough as me, and then he shook his head and laughed at something the other man said. His teeth came out, a fanned wing of teeth. This was, of course, the Belgian swimmer. The waitress took their menus, and the Belgian smiled at her in a banal, caddish way, and the waitress disappeared behind the vined lattice into the kitchen.

I turned to go, but stopped. The Belgian and the other man continued to talk. Even very early, everything is different in daylight, and I felt nothing about the Belgian except tired. If this is the kind of man Emma wants, then this has all been a big mistake, and all of it has been my fault.

I went to the screen by the kitchen door, passing the Belgian at his table, and as I waited for someone, I could hear the men speaking in French. The Belgian was looking at me. I waited at the screen. My waitress, the girl with the blonde bobbed

hair, leaned out and cocked her head at me and smiled. I held up what was left of the money from the night before in Elounda.

She came out of the kitchen. It is not necessary, she said. Manolis says to me you do not have to pay.

For you, I said and handed her five hundred drachmas. And tell Manolis and his mother thank you, I said. For breakfast.

The girl nodded. She was not pretty, but her smile was sweet. I headed for the door.

Excuse me, said someone behind me, a couple of tables away.

It was the Belgian, lifting out of his chair to call to me. Yes, I said.

Come, he said. There is something I want to ask you.

I'll just stay right here, I said.

The Belgian rattled a finger in his ear. Okay, he said and showed the teeth. You are sure there is nothing you wanted to ask me.

Nothing at all.

So, he said and it did not matter what he would have said next, but then he said it, sneering and uncomplicated, like the people you actually meet in the world. He said, How is your girlfriend?

I flew at him, snatched the placket of his polo shirt, and yanked him to his feet. Stay the fuck away from her, I spat, and now my spit is venom and my blood is alcohol and my skin is quaking on a lake of fire. If you ever touch her, I'll fucking kill

you, I said. Other chairs skidded across the slate, and suddenly it seemed all the men in the room were standing. I waited for the teeth to slither out under his smile, but the Belgian was stunned, and his eyes flickered in a real way. I went on, foaming, I don't know what I said. I felt drunk again, like I might tip over. I was not choosing words. Then I ran out of things to say. I let go of his shirt, and no one said anything. There was bouzouki music coming from the kitchen. The Belgian did not smile and did not say anything, and I left him and everyone else in silence.

At the entryway were the Moulders, and I ducked their gaze and went up the steps and smoked a cigarette. Outside the bungalow, where Emma was still asleep, I smoked two more, until my heart was calm. Then I got into bed with her, and fell asleep before I even had my arms around her, like falling backward into something dark and deep and warm that closes in around you from all sides, fills your nostrils and mouth, something like I have heard other people talk about rest.

THE ISLE OF TEARS

WE DRANK. She drank gin and tonics and sat upright on her barstool and would not look at me, and I drank whiskey and coke, and I hunched over the ashtray and smoked Camel Lights one after the other. Another one? she said but still would not turn, not meant to be a question, but something to exhale through the wires of smoke in the air. I swallowed the drink and inhaled on the cigarette and blew out, but said nothing to her. The smoke moved like ink through the wide blades of afternoon light. Behind us, the window framed Aghios Nikolaos bright as a postcard.

Here we are again, I said.

She said, What do we do now?

Sitting here isn't helping, I said. But I can't think of anything else.

She lifted her glass and examined the level, just under half full. She stared through the tumbler and to the dark red glass windows behind the bar, lit up like organs in the sunlight. Then she drank her drink down to almost nothing and looked back toward the kitchen for Nikos, who had opened up the bar for us while he cleaned the store room but did not know how much we were going to drink. She looked at me, her eyelids low, so beautiful it made me want nothing else, and she shook as though she had laughed and her mouth opened as if she had laughed, but no sound came out. It was only the two of us and the only sound was of some shuffling in the store room and our drinks on the bar and the slow smoldering cigarette. We did not talk about

last night, although we had been arguing, and now in the first quiet of us together, we began to remember. My beer was almost gone, and now we both looked for Nikos.

She hooked her big toe up over the bottom rung of my stool, pulled hard, and jerked her stool closer to mine. I set my hand on her bare knee, at the hem of her ivory skirt, but she did not do anything to show that she felt my touch, and my hand sat there without opening to hold her knee or to stroke the cool skin of her thigh under that hem. She cleared her throat.

I said, I'm sorry I said anything to him.

You told me already, she said. And I believe you. I do believe that you didn't mean to do it.

Now I held her knee. Thanks, I said. Maybe we should go into town to eat something before we get too drunk.

I don't think our bartender bargained for us, she said.

She called us a taxi from the lobby, and when it came we had eaten the ice from our drinks, and I left a thousand drachmas on the bar. We went to Aghios Nikolaos, where she told the driver to take us. I asked her if she did not want to go to Elounda, and she said no, and she said it sadly, the only thing she said. The air in the car was warm and oily. We were glad to be out of it when we arrived at the harbor, where there were always people sitting at the cafés at any time of day, even here in a stiff breeze that pulled the skin on the patio umbrellas. The noise of motorcycles sawed over the wind, but we could not see any motorcycles, and Emma said it must be

a rally, and she nodded to the far side of the wharf. We found a café that faced the sea, and I told Emma to order for both of us.

I went up Octovriou 28 Road to get money from a bank, and some of the shops were already closing in the early afternoon. It did not matter if anyone wanted to do some banking. In Greece, there was no such thing as banking. There were few people in the streets. Everyone could be at the motorcycle race. The kebab shop had its door halfway rolled down, and its backlit menu photographs were dulled. A lonely American couple passed me coming down the hill and stopped on the cobblestone just below the bank to sort through a table of discounted Greek football jerseys, and as I got out another great lot of drachmas from the machine, the wife said maybe this one, holding up a blue shirt that said Hellas. The husband joked. Said he ought to work off some moussaka if he was ever going to fit into that one, and he dragged that layer of his belly out until it snapped back. The motorcycles were like a hive, buzzing just a few blocks away, and the Americans moved slowly toward the cafes without saying anything about it, going closer to the sound.

Amstels were on the café table in front of Emma, and pint glasses to anchor the flapping cloth to the table. Next to us, three elderly Germans drank beer, too, and Emma said that she would have ordered us beer anyway, but not being the only ones made it seem less scandalous. I was a little glad that Emma had ordered us beer and not anything stronger.

Emma looked at me sadly, and my instinct was to wrap my arms around her and soak up whatever it was that had made her look at me that way. But then there

was last night, and there was Shane Hughes back in London, and I did nothing. Emma said, This could be the only time you ever come to Crete.

I shook my head. It's alright, I said. She was still looking at me, always so pretty when she was sad.

The food arrived. Two cheeseburgers. Emma shrugged and said she couldn't think of anything, and we ate. The cheeseburger was the same as the one I'd had at Albatros, but I said nothing to Emma about it. Together, me and Emma and the Germans watched a water taxi with the driver standing upright behind the wheel. He sliced toward us, past the large cubes of boats filling with tourists to take to Spinalonga, pushing a crest of white foam, and knocked the side of the boat up against the ramp at the next café. There two teenage Greek boys waited, and they leaped onto the water taxi before it had stopped bucking in its own wake. When the driver cut the engine to take money from the boys, the motorcycle sound filled the empty sound, and we all looked in the direction from which it had come.

The line of cafés and hotels roped around the harbor, disappearing at a point in the distance made cloudy with spray and flares of light like the light cut by jewels, caught spinning in the spray and the breeze. Somewhere over there was Ela. Above and beyond the hotels was another row of rooftops, and another, covering all of the hill by the sea. You could see the trenches cut in between the buildings for streets, but you could not see the darkly shadowed streets, nor see the motorcycles deep down within them. Above the sound of the motorcycles, the spray in the sky was pink and yellow, and it was as though you could see the sound. The mist touched our faces, and the people around us rubbed their bare arms, but we did not feel anything.

Emma stared at her empty plate as though it belonged to someone else. I lay my hand next to her plate, palm up, and she smiled a little at me, and I felt her hand slide into mine on the table and squeeze.

What do we do now? she said.

I said, Let's say goodbye together. To Crete.

What do you mean? she said.

We only have a couple of days left, I said.

Three, she said.

Would you come with me to Spinalonga? I said, and she sighed and looked afraid. I had not thought of going to Spinalonga since Emma and I had been talking about it at the Medusa in Plaka, and I did not know why I had not gone out there on my own. But suddenly I felt it was something that we should do. She did not say anything, and I held her hand on the table between our dirty plates until the waiter came and I let go, and she reached for her little backpack at her feet, the same bag she always carried. The same bag she had with her that night we went to the Barzaar in Camden, years ago, my passport in the pocket. I told Emma no, and I paid the waiter when he passed by on his way back across the street, and Emma said thank you. There was no convincing to be done. Whatever we did today was going to be something for us to remember about each other after all of this was over.

Then she said, You haven't gone out there already?

I've been too busy with everything else, I said. There's been a lot to see.

But you were so set on it, Emma said.

I guess I was waiting for you, I said.

You really want me to go with you?

I think you have to, I said and smiled.

The waiter returned with my change and Emma said thank you again, and we stood to leave. Emma said, Do you think that boat has a full bar? She was looking at the one closest to us. She said, I suddenly fancy another gin and tonic.

I said, We had better find you one immediately.

We went across the suddenly empty street to a corner shop with a poster in the window advertising excursions to Spinalonga, with Full Greek BBQ and Boat Party. Just as we closed the shop door, engines roared behind us, and we spun around, Emma's hand jumping to her chest, and we watched through the door as a fleet of motorcycles raced down the street. It took a moment to understand what we were seeing. We didn't say anything, and our minds worked it out that this was the race of the motorcycles we had been hearing, that their course had finally brought them to our side of the harbor. The street had been empty because traffic had been blocked off somewhere else. We had not been paying any attention. The road turned right in front of the shop, and now the motorcycle riders had to lean in hard to make the curve, but then there were too many riders all at once, and the street was jammed with them in a cloud of kicked back dust, alien in their dayglo suits and insect-faced helmets, and the men were standing with their motorcycles between their legs, picking up the bikes and waddling forward around the turn, the wheels already spinning and blasting jets of dust into the air as soon as the tires touched the road. But then it all kept going.

Emma turned the postcard spinner in the shop and I bought the tickets, and I looked at the face of the man behind the schoolteacher desk in the shop and wanted to remember it, and wanted to remember how much I paid for the tickets or what the air was like in there or if there was music playing, as I wanted to remember everything differently now. But none of what I tried to keep has stayed. When something happens for the first time, your mind is jarred enough to hold it in another place, and so I can still see the motorcycles and the men struggling to get through the turn, their heavy engines made useless, picking their bikes up and turning them like children. But you do not know something has happened for the last time until later, and you cannot make yourself remember it in the way you wish you could, no matter how hard you try. I can suppose that all there was of Emma was a dark, beautiful shape in the window against the light that came in from the street, and I can know the way she stood, with her shoulders far back as they always were. She might have picked up one of the postcards and turned it over, thinking that these were the same postcards she had seen on every spinner six years earlier when she lived in Elounda. She might have laughed and thought to send one to her friend Debbie, who had moved to Crete with her and now lived in Australia, or Emma might have been so used to seeing these postcards that she did not give them a thought at all. She might have played with her hair. I know we stood outside on the curb and waited for all of the motorcycles, and I wished we had stayed inside, away from the sound and exhaust. But I did not know then what Emma was thinking, and I did not know it was going to be the last time we did something like that together.

What are you thinking? I asked her but it was noisy.

What's that? she said.

Nothing, I said and after all but the last few motorcycles had buzzed by, we crossed the road to the boat.

In the few minutes we waited to board the ferry, it became skin-cooking hot and Emma watched her bare shoulders burn. Tourists were on the top level of the boat, and others were warily climbing the three fake-lawn-carpeted steps to get on board. Emma went up first and found places at the bar, and I waited for a pair of elderly women dressed in stylish sailing outfits to ignore the assistance of the Greek teenager at the prow, and I thought about how for Emma there would always be a place at any bar. The other tourists had discovered the bar and the band of shade cast on it from the machinery of the boat and its upper level, and those with their drinks in hand leaned toward the shade even if they could not occupy it, but Emma had walked right up and found two empty chairs. In front of me, a young man with black-rimmed glasses pressed his beer bottle to the pinkish cheeks of his girlfriend, and they seemed very ordinary to me. It was something different to be with Emma. Wherever we went, there was a place for her, and being with her meant that there was a place for me, too. I was with her when she won a contest for being the prettiest girl in the bar, and had my own large bar tab cleared as part of the prize, and I was with her when any kind of brazen man would come right up to her and introduce himself in a store or at the park or even at a restaurant where Emma and I were having dinner, and once at the racetrack a man came up to me and said he wanted to shake my hand, and when I asked why, he just shook his head and looked at Emma. I knew she was beautiful. But part of me believed her when she said that all the attention was because she

seemed slightly exotic to Americans because of her accent. Then, when we went to England together, I saw that it was the same thing, and now, on the boat to Spinalonga, I was reminded that it was the same thing with men everywhere. Emma lifted her handbag and I slid in between the other tourists and sat on the stool she had saved for me, and the bartender already had a drink for me waiting. Alright, mate, he said to me. Australian. I looked at Emma and she looked away.

THE CITY MOVED AWAY from us, and the light on the whitest stone cooled to blue as the expanse of churned sea grew between the boat and the harbor. Emma and I felt guilty and took our drinks out onto the deck and found a place to sit on benches along the side of the boat, dry as sunbleached bone, and we both turned to watch the land go by, frosted by the spray. The other people were talking. There were many Greeks on the boat, and some of them tried to talk to us, but Emma and I were quiet, and we watched a young woman take a photo of her boyfriend flexing his bicep, the lump of his muscle meant to match the rise of the island from the sea. An orange buoy knocked along under the seat. As we made a long slow, arc away from the harbor, the water went from gilded, shimmery white to deep blue closer to the boat, and next to us, beyond the crashing white foam, the sea was ghostly green, lit from inside.

Do you know America the Beautiful? I said.

Emma looked doubtful. You're not going to sing it to me if I say no, she said.

I reached over the edge to catch some spray. You know I wouldn't sing if you paid me, I said. There's just a line in it—from California, to the Gulf Stream waters.

I remember it, Emma said. We did it in school.

One of my friends told me just the other day he always thought it was ghost green waters, I said.

Who thought that?

Someone you wouldn't know.

Emma pointed to the shore, where we were passing Hera Village, a Greek dollhouse broken apart and spread from high up on the hill to the dark crags in the surf. Two people stood at the rail by the swimming pool, too small from so far away to recognize. Further down, on the long slopes toward the beach, the door to number twenty was open, but there was no one to see.

Emma said, You sang with me just that once.

You tricked me, I laughed.

I thought certainly that if you tried karaoke once you'd be hooked.

You were wrong about me, I said.

I can't believe we're going to Spinalonga.

You don't want to go?

No, I quite like it, actually. I have a bit of the fear.

You seem fine.

My lip doesn't look a bit twitchy?

You used to ask me that when you wanted me to kiss you, I said.

Did I? What do you know.

I'm still learning, I said and wished she would stop, because there was no way for me to stop.

Hera Village receded, too, and we moved parallel to the steepest part of the island between the hotel and Elounda, under the Easter-egg painted resort at the summit, and on along the lowering slope of windmills. On the water, the hills were prettier than they were from the road, and beyond the windmills, the hills in the distance seemed bigger, too, behind a drape of gauzy light, and each hill behind each other hill growing in scale but becoming less and less defined, and Emma said, That's where we were last night, and pointed out a row of impossibly tiny houses on a ridge in the clouds, and then a few minutes later we saw that what we had been looking at could not have possibly been the raki bars above Elounda, because directly below them was the town of Plaka. Above everything, the clouds over Crete were stacks of white smoke, like volcanic steam, frozen in photographic time.

We came around the peninsula covered in windmills and could see the shadow of Spinalonga for the first time. Everyone moved to our side of the boat to look at the dark fortress, now with the sun on the opposite side of the island, and we turned almost completely around on the bench, and Emma twisted up against me and pressed her hip into my thigh. Up close, the fortress walls were battered with the onslaught of armies and the sea, twenty feet tall in some stretches, and punched through with dripping coves elsewhere, and our tourist boat glided around the north face of the island, where a lone tower still stood high over the wall, and back out into the sun. Around the side, the island was terraced, and there were those boxes of buildings like

everywhere else on Crete, and the defensive walls did not make a solid, singular ring that rose straight up from the slim strip of beach, but instead coursed through the landscape, making a serpentine line up to a massive stone cylinder at the southern end of the island, with slats cut into the stone for the defenders of Spinalonga to watch the enemies that came not from the sea but from the lagoon of Elounda itself. We docked in a slot between two other boats like ours, and we stepped out across a plank carpeted in the same green turf as the steps in the harbor of Aghios Nikolaos, onto a jetty protected by a ring of old rubber tires, the ghostly water sloshing below.

We followed the crowd from the dock and into another crowd at the fortress gates, where there were people waiting to get in and other people waiting for their boats, families in their swimming clothes trying to find lost children. Emma took my hand and pulled me through, and we went up a long ramp where no one else was going, coastwise to the fortress, squared off here into big steep blocks.

Here we are, I said. Storming the fortress.

Are you going to do that every time?

Do what every time?

That act. It just makes things worse.

You hate me when I take things so seriously.

I never said such a thing. I really have the fear now, she said.

But we're off the boat. We're here.

Yeah, she said and held her arms and rubbed them as if she were cold, but neither of us were cold. She said, I think I just realized that, that we're here.

You've been here before.

She tilted her head away from me.

I said, You just said you liked it.

She said, Alex, the only time I ever came out here was when I was completely off my head, for a party on the beach, and we tried to break in. Me and Maarten and Robbie and Debbie.

We could get you another drink, I said. We could go back to the bar on the boat for awhile if you want.

Let's talk about something else, she said. Tell me a story.

Is this about the lepers? Or something else?

Her eyes welled, blue as every color blue in the sky over us on Crete, or the flat mountains in the blue sandstorms of light across the Aegean, except her eyes were not flat, and were now filled with sudden depth. In them were also the reflected blue clouds, and the ghost green lagoon, and a ping of watery light that came and went, flashing from the pane of the Medusa patio door behind me in Plaka, or from the big jewelry in the Ble store displays in Elounda, or from the turn of a knife blade in the sun on the deck of Kalidon, but I did not turn to see from where it came. I did not know if I was anywhere in what she was seeing, but there was a place where there wasn't anything else, and when I looked into it, she took my hand. She said, Just talk, and I'll go in with you.

I did not know what to say, and said so. I don't think I know any stories, I said.

Anything, she said and we were off, but then she stopped us. She said, But nothing dreadful.

No cemetery stories?

Yes please, she said, sweet as a girl.

Alright.

Let's go the other way, she said. And do think quickly.

We went down the ramp and to the other entrance, where the walls grew very steep around us and led to a passage tunneled into the stone. Go on then, she said at the tunnel's mouth and her voice went away into the hollow.

Alright, I said. And then we went into the tunnel and I told her I was going to give her our story, the one that we had made. We went deep into the stone wall, from the full warm light beyond the fortress, which had filled her eyes in that way, into shadow and then full darkness, where we followed the sound of footsteps and the tinny voices ahead of us. I told the story, began with the first time I ever saw her.

You know what Matt says about you? I said. Matt was my best friend and had known Emma too.

What did he say? Emma said.

He says you are a true beauty.

I love Matt, she said.

Then there was a bright white slice of light ahead, and after a few more steps, we could see the whole opening of the other end, all very bright at first, and then we

could see the people in a plaza in the warm afternoon. Emma said that the people ahead of us looked like they were in a film, and they did, framed by the dark mouth of our cave, and then Emma said she was sorry to interrupt, that I should keep going. She said she liked it, and I kept on.

We came upon the other tourists in the plaza. Our eyes shrank in the light, and we ducked our heads from it, and passed through one group of people looking up silently to their guide, a German who waved to show the collapsed wall of a ruined house set into the mountainside. A single dead tree stuck out of the crack in the masonry of the building on the other side of the road. The guide said something to the people like, The first neighborhood of the leprous city greets us sadly. My German was very bad. Everywhere around us were piles of fallen stones which once were part of something, now only stones in piles packed with florid weeds. We moved into a small main street of buildings, some as stark as that first roofless stall, with its irregular castle blocks, and other cement structures with new doors and red and yellow and grassy green paint. The town must have once been quite grand. These had been the tailor's shop, and the bakery, and the apothecary, and now were museums, and we went inside, following people as they snaked through the cool rooms past not ancient relics but photographs of the inhabitants of the island no more than seventy-five years ago. Here the lepers had lived out the rest of their lives with each other, a friendly port between this world and the next, and they worked as nurses and cooks, went to the cinema, whiled away weary hours at the café, and fell in love and were married. That lepers were still sent as outcasts to this detention center, when medicine had long been available to make such an act criminal, was a fact that I knew well from my work

with cemeteries, but I said nothing. We followed tour groups, whose guides were too young or too old, who spoke in Greek or English. Inside the museums I stopped telling Emma the story, but as soon as we were out the door I kept on, and people looked to me as though I were saying something important about Spinalonga, so I started pointing out to the ruins when I talked, but the only tour I was giving was the one of how I came to be so in love with Emma, and she was the only one who listened.

On this side of the island had been a whole city, and the shells of buildings cut into the hill on broad stone terraces. We followed a steep stairway up and away from the crowd, where only a few others ahead of us climbed, disappearing ahead of us into the maze of older Venetian structures. Along the way were flowers planted in big, old feta tins like the ones in every grocer's case. We came upon an archway which was the only part left of its building. Below us was a quarry, and above was the south tower, facing the lagoon, and someone in an archer's window waved down in our direction from there, but to someone else, and whoever it was called back in English from behind someplace hidden. The steps were worn slick and steep, but some over two feet high, and on those I would get myself going and get up first and then take Emma's hand and bring her up to me. She was wearing sandals with nothing on the sole. It's bloody boiling, Emma said. Keep going, she said. I did, and we moved up to the tower, breathing harder than either of us had thought.

I think that we were both happy then. We looked out toward Elounda from the promontory along the fortress wall, but the wall was too high, and the windows for the lookouts were deep and narrow, and from them you could only see in a straight line. There was Elounda. We were not together, and we were not going to be, but as I told

her our story we were no longer looking at what might be. Our story is like anyone's, a sequence of one thing leading to another. As I was telling it, our history took shape, and inevitably I remembered some things and forgot others, and I told her every nice thing I could think of but did not hide the other parts. Was it because I cooked her lobster for her twenty-sixth birthday, a month after my mother died, that Emma knew that I needed her too much and began pulling away? I did not ask. We went back down toward the lepers' village, through a thicket of real pine trees and into the town where there were more people, moving through the unguarded rooms, and from overhead the hill was teeming like a warren. A Greek guide said in English, To a bombarded place resembles the leprous city. It dies slowly, suddenly.

We came down the stairs and passed a church with a bell tower, and next to it, what looked to be the most elaborate of the dollhouse shrines to the dead either of us had seen, but then we saw it was only a model of the church of Saint Panteleimon, built in 1709, and on the top was a slot for donations to help restore it. We did not put any money in. We did not share the same future as the church. As we walked along ground which we had never walked, there was no more thinking about what was next, and every new corner became already old to us in our story. Even when we came upon a tangled grove of cactus with spiked petals as big as my open hand, and we were surprised by this thick pocket of alien plants, on which some were covered in fuchsia fruit and oozing white sores like empty eyes, we spoke only of its oddity for a moment, and then I kept on, and those last seconds we had spent became another part of our story, on the whole planet of our past. We were moving more quickly now. The afternoon was tipping away, and there was less and less to tell.

We rounded the north end of the island, where the fortress went out to the water like a giant's jawbone, where cannons had once been set in the gaps between the giant teeth, and we walked on beams and sheets of plywood set over the holes in the ramparts. There were less people the further we went, and everything had calmed. Emma said she no longer had the fear. I kept on, and told her as much as I could think of to say, and I felt the same way I'd felt at the ticket agent, like I could stare hard or grab tight and still not remember what was happening later. I do not know everything I told her. There were things I had always meant to tell her, but I do not know if I did. We passed another whitewashed church, and another smuggler's cove, and a pit of more cactus more elaborate than the first in the craziness of its growth and the horrific decaying wounds. Did she walk faster than me so I had to keep up? Did she tilt her head back or did she stare at the ground? We walked on, having stood over the bizarre cactus grove but never having looked at it.

And finally we were back where we had started, at the main gate, below the stairway that led to the lepers' cemetery. We were footsore and had not even realized how cold it had become, the sun long gone and the sky pale purple, and I said, And that's when you asked if I would come with you to Crete. It looks like we've made it to the end, I said.

Don't joke about it, she said. And then, I never thought that I would have to even imagine my life without you.

I said, and remember now saying so, Even without you, without us seeing each other for the last three years, I could still think about you. Wonder what you were doing.

You still can. Think about me, if you want, she said.

But now I know I won't see you again.

Emma began to cry silently, and she turned away and wiped her nose.

I said, I'll never forget about you.

It's so terrible, she said.

I'll remember, I said. I'll remember everything.

She said, I know you know about Shane, but it isn't what you think. I guessed that you had probably met someone because you had stopped calling altogether, even when you were drunk. Someone with neat hair, no doubt. Shane has only been back in England for about a month, and he didn't have anywhere else to go. I didn't expect to see you ever again, and it was nice to feel like I was still in demand. And then you showed up.

I said, It's something I should have done a long time ago.

Let's keep going, she said and wrapped her arms around my shoulders and put her face to my chest.

There's no more story, I said.

That's not what I meant, she said. And of course there is, she said and pulled away. Here we go! She took me by the hand and we climbed the narrow, weed-tufted steps up to the cemetery, on a kind of platform at the southeast corner of the fortress walls, and here was where the lepers came finally to rest, in the only place in the fortress with a clear vista, and you could see the entire evening lagoon. Elounda was

ours, as suddenly as we had risen out of the walls of the fortress. On this mesa before us was a field of vaults—dark shafts into the ground, lidded with concrete slabs with metal rings for handles, and all the lids were jerked apart from the graves. Closer were stone markers swallowed in the feathery weeds. There was no one else here.

Emma squeezed my hand and looked at me and said, Tell me about the cemetery, Alex.

I don't know a thing about this one, I said.

No, Emma said. The one in Boise. Where your mother is. You've learned so much and I've never let you tell me anything.

What do you want to know?

Is it a nice place? Emma said.

You were there, I said.

Emma shook her head, as though to say that although she had been there at my side after the funeral, holding my hand then as she was now, that what would later happen between us was already taking place, that she was not there, as much as she wanted to be. She said, I'm sorry I broke my promise to her—that I'd take care of you. You don't know what it's like to break a promise like that.

She was happy to know you were there, I said.

That's why I'm so sorry, Emma said. She said, I really believed that I was going to be with you forever. I made a promise I was incapable of keeping, because of who I am and always will be no matter what I do or tell myself. She died thinking you were going to be looked after.

And you did, I said. I'm here right now, aren't I?

Emma nodded. Do you visit her?

Sometimes, I said. It's a really pretty place.

I'm glad for that, she said. And then something came over her, and she dropped my hand and said, Something must be done, and stepped over the thin chain barrier into the weeds. She picked her way through with her toes, stepping only on the footstones, and got across and to the vaults, where she dropped down and grabbed a ring and dragged the lid over the closest uncovered shaft, and it made the sound of dragged stone falling into place. I followed her to the graves.

Emma, I said, you don't know which ones go where.

Oh go on, she said and grabbed another ring. Don't fall, she said.

I squatted down next to her and pulled on the closest lid. There was nothing written on any of the stone slabs, nor on the shafts themselves, and we moved the caps back onto their graves, one after the other, four dozen in all, and it was impossible not to look down into the shafts, but the angle of the sun when we could have seen the bones was gone, and now, unless someone moved what we had done, those bones would stay hidden in the earth, where all bones should be left. I had never moved anything in a cemetery before. Never thrown away a dead potted plant six weeks after memorial day, nor moved a cent from the grave of Ernest Hemingway. Once I found a letter from my father to my mother on her grave after he had remarried, soaked through from the morning sprinklers, and the urge was to fling it away, then chase after it and rip it open, and apart, but I left my father's letter, too. But now I was

returning something to where it belonged, even if I did not know where which one went, and Emma and I moved further apart as we worked, to other ends of the cemetery, and we both stood and looked out across what we had done.

She came to me. We have to get drunk immediately, she said.

It was the best idea she had ever had. We walked down out of the cemetery, my arm around her. A chill jolted through her, from in her bones, and she made a noise, not a word, but something like, Weee-ugh. Then she laughed in a nervous way and whispered, I can't believe I just did that. Creepy!

We went down the long ramp out of the fortress to the evening sea, to an empty harbor. All of the boats had gone.

NOSTOS AND ALGOS

WE WENT TO THE JETTY, all the way out to the end of the one where our boat had been, as though going those ten feet closer to Elounda made any difference. For a moment, Emma and I were silent. She looked desperately out at the lagoon, scanning the coastline for breaks in the lights which might be ships. I turned to the fortress, and of course it had gone back to the dark, flat shape of an omen I had seen from the shores of Elounda and Plaka. There was a small floodlight in the side of the snack bar, its windows now shuttered, and the ticket bureau was boarded up for the night, too, and had no lights. Elounda had never been so far away.

She began to cry a scared, halting cry. I reached for her, and she ran away, back to the shore. There was nowhere to go. Emma, I called out. The sound of her sandals like xylophone hammers on the boards of the dock raced away from me. Then the sound stopped, and her outline stopped moving. I stepped on something. One of her sandals. I got it, and went to her, and she was shaking apart. I gave her the sandal. She threw it on the beach. I touched her arm, and she squirmed away, as though my fingers were snakes.

Now what are we supposed to do? she said in a way that said that we had tried everything else, as defeated as I had ever seen her. Up close, I could see her face, taking whatever light it could from the horizon, and her eyes were shimmery. I went back toward the dock, looking instead toward Plaka, on the much closer shore. I did

not know the distance, but I could see the marquee for the Medusa. Its design, if not the words. It was further than I had ever tried to swim at once, and the thought struck me that whatever had taken place between Emma and the Belgian in the hotel swimming pool was not resolved. In the daytime, we could have waved for help and someone on the Plaka beach might see us and get help. But then, in the daytime, we would not have been left alone on the island.

I do not know why I felt nothing about having been left there. When I returned to Emma, she worked back through how we could not have possibly been forgotten. That someone on the boat would have remembered us, or how certainly someone was in charge of the security of the museums, and how they would be the last to leave. Maybe they were still closing up, and they could take us back to shore on their own private boat, hidden in some official port out of view. In fact, we had locked the last door behind us, the spring-loaded iron gate swinging back into place after we pushed through it. But we have been forgotten, I said.

We can't be!

We are. And now I grabbed her by the wrists and she choked on a leftover tear.

She broke free of me and said, There! Look!

Emma, don't be stupid, I snapped. But she was right. A boat was crossing the lagoon toward Spinalonga. A lantern on the water. It mowed toward us with its tiny, high engine. Emma did not answer me or my tone. She ran to the shore in her one sandal, away from me. Somehow this was all very familiar. I put my hands in my

pockets, and, surprised, found my cigarettes. I did not know when I had smoked last, and I was sober. I lit one. I looked at Emma standing up to her ankles in the water and was very sober. She waited there for the boat, and I stood where I was.

The brothers who saved us from Spinalonga that night were named Petros and Ghiorghios, but they asked us to call them Pete and George. They had been fishing in the lagoon and came to the beach to have a cookout and drink some ouzo, George told us, while Pete walked up behind me to a nearby bush and bent down and lit it on fire. Pete looked as though he had not been fishing but had spent a month in a restaurant kitchen. George wore a dress shirt and slacks, and when he spoke his head moved as though his body were strutting, and I liked him right away, perhaps because he reminded me of Manolis when he and the other one were butchering the pig. They were going to go ahead with their plan, and rescue us when they were done, but we were welcome to join them, and we did. The ouzo helped, and all I had to share was my cigarettes, and we all smoked while Pete gathered stones and built a structure around the burning bush, the spiked helixes of branches crackling and spitting orange fluff out into the darkened sky. George gave me and Emma the two glasses meant for he and Pete, and we drank, and he drank from the bottle and told us about the motorcycle race we had seen in town earlier that day, and how he had been a professional motocross racer and once owned a motorcycle rental shop of his own in Thessalonika, but the poor health of his father brought him back to Crete to run the family business, a restaurant in Elounda called Lotus Eaters. Emma and I had passed it on the way to the beach on my first visit to Elounda, it now seemed so long ago.

Pete had stayed on Crete the whole time, learning about the restaurant, and his English was not as good. He made several trips back to the tiny boat, and Emma looked at the boat and I could see each time that she was wondering if we would even all fit on it, it was so small. Pete brought what looked like a terracotta vase, and he showed us that the top was sealed with dough, and he set it down right in the center of the fire, and lay a grate over that, and from his plastic grocery sacks threw on quarters of chicken in oily red marinade that hissed and smoked when they hit the fire, and then the air was full of lemons and the sizzling chicken skin. Pete and George flapped out overlapping beach towels, of which all were pornographic, and whose pornography was not noticed, and we moved to sit on them side by side and looked at the fire as though this had been the plan all along. Pete sat closest and said little, poking the chicken with a stick he'd found in the sand and getting up to find scraps of matter to burn. George and Emma talked, and I smoked, and we all passed the ouzo and forgot about the glasses at all. Emma asked why they'd brought chicken if the idea was to go fishing for dinner, and George said he did not think they would be so lucky. He winked at her. Emma asked what kinds of fish they caught today and George said, All kinds. Not sharks.

George played bouzouki in a band, and it did not take long between learning this and him bringing the instrument in from the boat to play for us. We drank a bottle of retsina, and Pete and Emma sang along with George, but I did not know the words. I asked them some what the songs were called, but the only one I remember is named Gorgona, and I do not remember they way they sang it, grinning with wine in the firelight, smelling the sea and the chicken, but I have heard the song since, because I

have looked for it. When I hear the song now, I try to remember, but the wine and ouzo were then taking over, and all I remember is that Emma did not say a single word to me the whole time, but smoked my very last cigarette. I also remember that Emma had a much better singing voice than she would ever care to know. It was almost pretty, but maybe only because it was shy, and maybe I only think that because of how she once took me to a karaoke bar, and when I came back from the bathroom, she was singing *Hopelessly Devoted To You*, to me, and that it somehow steered from being sickly sweet because it was so shy.

But now she was not singing to me, and we did not say anything to each other. It was safe silence. We had said everything there was to say. We did not say anything with our bodies, or our eyes. Our story was over, we were full. We did not need anything then.

Finally Pete plated the chicken for us and pulled the clay pot from the flames by scooping it out with the shovel he later used to bury the fire. He set the pot in a dug-out basin in the sand and tore off the charred ring of dough, flinging it into the water and blowing on his burnt fingertips, and the smell of sweet garlic and herbs came to us on the sea wind. He showed us how now the earthen pot was black. We passed him our plates—which looked to have come from someone's house—and Pete heaped from the pot a thick mass of chickpeas, chopped tomatoes, onions, whole garlic cloves, and bouquets of fresh thyme. He gave us each a joint of chicken, and cold zucchini flowers stuffed with mint, fennel, parsley, and feta cheese. It was all delicious, and we packed our empty insides with it, not knowing until we ate that there

was anything else to need, then all lay back in exhaustion from the meal and looked up to the sky. The stars were still there.

Pete brought another bottle of retsina for us from the boat, and beer. He played the bouzouki and hopped around the fire, and we did not know what it was until he sang. The Rolling Stones, Paint It Black. We had so many great ideas on the beach of Spinalonga. We were all going to be best friends forever. George and Pete wanted to throw me into the sea they were so happy, and we all breathed hard and held each other just above the elbow and felt the cool blast of sea and felt that there was something else out there beside us. We talked about addresses and phone numbers, and I noticed that Emma was not saying anything, but George and Pete and I went on.

Pete said, This is probably the best time I've ever had in my entire life.

Me too, I said.

Pete said, You do not understand. I can say it in so many words, but, what is it that I say to you and to me that I will recall anything?

The pops of fire were less and less, then it died, and George said he would take us home. Emma told him Elounda would be fine, but George insisted that he could take us all the way back to the hotel, and before long we were all on the boat, moving as though in sleep, as though the night had been much, much longer, and we were all resigned to the next day. We had not thought we needed sleep, but that was something we remembered, too.

The little fishing boat rounded Spinalonga and went out to the vast, dark sea, and I thought that the way I want to go is to have my body sent out into the Aegean or

some other beautiful mass of blue, like something from mythology. But it was dark now, and it was not a thing to tell George or Pete, and not Emma. Not now. Pete drove us home.

We drank Mythos on the way back, and I opened one and it spilled foam down my chest. I apologized for not being able to offer anything in return but the Greeks were so proud for having rescued me and Emma from the Isle of Tears that saying sorry was made silly.

I do not need it, George said and I knew what he meant.

WE ARRIVED AT HERA VILLAGE in full night and Pete killed the engine and jumped out of the boat into the crags on the seashore and pulled us in the rest of the way and I looked up at the hotel, the lit up arches, the outline of trees and flowers that made one solid matte against the dark blue stone. Emma was asleep, her head on my lap, something she had never done before. I wanted to feed her the way she had fed me in the taxi from Camden, but left her alone. The boat bucked against the rock and the splashback, but she slept or pretended to until a breeze came up and threw her hair into her eyes. She woke. Her eyelashes whisked against my thigh. She sat up and scratched her nose and stood and looked at Pete and stepped off the boat onto the shore. In the wind her smell came back to me, the mix of her fake tan and shampoo and lotion and makeup and laundry and her skin and sweat and breath, and it blew past me, and there was only the salty sweet rot of the beach. I followed onto shore, and did not take the hand that Pete offered, but made an awkward jerking lunge instead and braced myself on his shoulder as though to vault. The hotel was awake and up the hill

was bouzouki music and other music and the hiss of frying pans and the glug of retsina into tumblers and voices and cars on the hill. Pete shook my hand, and kissed Emma's, and bounded back onto the boat. I reached out to George, and he gave me a plastic sack full of stiff fish. I can't, I said, and he closed his eyes. Thank you, I said. Emma cleared her throat and took my other hand and took one step forward and fell back into me, unsure of her feet, and I pushed her back up with the weight of my body and we staggered into motion again. Pete started up the boat's motor, and we waved goodbye.

We climbed up the path and as we went I looked back at the old van forgotten in the high weeds of the beach, rooted down deep in the landscape, with no sign of life inside. The only way for it to have come here to rest was by boat or by tumbling from the road high above. The path was too narrow. The windshield was webbed with gunshot white fracture that filled with the light from the lanterns along the path. The only light. We switched back with the trail and passed the group of rooms below the restaurant, and #20's door was wide open, and inside was the sound of a suitcase zipping apart, but the room was dark.

We came to the hotel's main level and the chickpea bush and the swimming pool, and I asked Emma, Do you want to call it a night?

Not yet, she said.

A drink?

You read my mind, she said and I dropped the bag of fish behind the plant and we went further up the hill.

The lobby was pulsing with sound when we entered, attended by the quacking parrot, and at every table the people turned to watch us as we came in, so glorious were we, every table full, even the ones outside the doors and next to the snooker table and ringed around the fountain under the now dark skylight. Emma said something to me, and I asked what, but she shook her pretty head. A white plastic rectangle above us said EXODUS in recessed, lit green letters, but in Greek, and I could read Greek now, and wasn't that really something? We stopped at the bar door and Emma breathed and took me inside with her, where the room was full of people and red light and Manolis was behind the bar in a toga made of bedsheets, and Nikos too, and on the stereo they were stupidly blasting Zorba The Greek. Manolis wore a tight ring of jasmine vine fixed around his head, and a big leaf bobbed in front of his left eye. He saw me and I moved in between the two teenage girls I'd seen floating in the pool and took the Amstels Manolis had set out for me and lay down a thousand drachmas and turned around and gave one to Emma. We drank hard and looked out at the room. Over by the bay windows were the Moulder girls, with beers in hand, and through the aquarium light I could see the Russians, and Irini with them, and at a high table were Connor's parents, and next to them were Patrick and Sharon Moulder. I did not see Gerald or Raja, or Chaim, who I knew to be gone, but almost everyone else was there. At the far end of the bar was the Belgian and his friend, now in matching tracksuit windbreakers, maroon and skyblue. Emma looked at them too and looked away.

Alex, Alex, said Manolis behind us, and I moved back in between the girls. The one with the less dramatic chest wrinkled her nose.

Manolis set his heavy, orangutan gaze upon me. He said, You will wear a toga.

I laughed. There was no one else in the bar wearing a toga except for the bartenders. And one man, hunched over in a science fiction beam of red overhead light, next to the Belgian. Maybe later, I said.

It is for a party, Manolis said.

I can see that, I said.

It is tradition, he said.

Sure. Ancient Greek tradition. I'll talk to Emma.

Emma was looking at the other man in the toga. She said, Poor bastard.

Manolis wants us to put on togas, too, I said into her ear.

Who?

The bartender.

Not bloody likely, she said.

Thank you for being on the same page, I said.

We haven't been in this bar together since the first night, Emma said.

Well, and this afternoon, I said.

Emma made a dismissive frown. You know I meant that, too. You seem really happy, she said. Can I have a cigarette?

I gave one to her, and we smoked, and we agreed that the cigarettes were delicious. Our beers went away. Disco music came on. Emma went to use the restroom, and I went to the bar to get more to drink. I was happy. Manolis said he would only give me more to drink if I put on a toga, and I laughed again and said that I would if Emma would, and then he gave me my beer and a shot of ouzo. The room moved around me, and I spoke to people as though they were my friends, and they did, too. In the air was the feeling of post-championship, and we all wanted to stay in it before we went back to the rest of the world. Our time on Crete was over, but we were all still here. We could still stay here. We could always be here, in this bar, where there was so much sudden goodwill. Ouzo tasted different here, and cigarettes, and noise. I went to the man at the end of the bar in the toga in the red light. A plucked bird under a heat lamp, roasted past done. Around the chicken skin of his wrist was a copper chain.

How did you get roped into this? I said.

That man, he said and aimed his cigarette at Manolis. The bald man spoke with a Russian accent, but he was not one of the Russians I knew, and he was very much apart from them. He said, That man, he says to me, It's a party, It's a party. I am now the jester.

We're all having a good time, I said. It is a party. Where are you from?

Ukraine, he said. The man looked at me. You will wear the toga.

I don't know, I said. My girlfriend—

She, he said and put his hand to his chest to catch his breath. He said, She is the most beautiful woman I ever see in my life, he said. She will wear the toga.

I don't think we have extra sheets, I said.

What?

I mimed sleep, my praying hands at the side of my face and closed eyes. I said, I. Don't. Have. Sheets.

The man pointed again to Manolis and Manolis came to him and they spoke in Greek. Manolis said to me, You know where to find the sheets, where they are drying.

Then Emma was back beside me, and I gave her my beer. She kissed me on the cheek. Are you drunk? I yelled to her, and she gave a big nod. She drank and bobbed her chin to the music, and then Manolis said her name. He leaned over to her, and she leaned in to the bar, and the jasmine leaf hung over where he spoke into her ear. I smoked and drank my ouzo, and the Ukrainian smirked at me.

And then we were out of the bar, pulling laundry from the lines along the alley to our bungalow. We yanked down the sheets and the wooden laundry pins snapped and went flying to the cobblestone. We thought we heard something, and we ran, with wadded sheets spilling from our arms. Music raced past us, and a cat sprung from the path. Again Emma was running, and I slowed and watched her disappear in the darkness, but now she laughed and things were very different than just a few hours before. I gathered the sheets in a better ball and walked. What was anyone going to do to me now, at this point? What could happen now that would change anything?

Come along, will you? Emma whispered loud from up ahead, giggling drunk.

In the room we stood back to back and fashioned our togas. I pulled off my trousers and wrapped one sheet around my waist, but this was a two-sheet job. I tried to work it out. It was the stupidest thing. I had never been to a toga party in college. Never before in my life. I wound up the second sheet and threw it over my shoulder.

That's not fair, Emma said and I turned around and she was naked from the waist up and she clapped her hands to her hips.

What's not?

You can't wear a bloody shirt underneath, she said and started with my shirt-buttons. She worked up from the bottom, pulling the fabric taut, and I was looking down at what she was doing but not watching her hands. When she got the last one undone, my shirt flew open and she took a drunk step back. Then she came at me again and had my undershirt off. She looked at me and started laughing, and she was still half-naked in front of me.

You're a lobster, she said and pressed her thumb into my chest and it left a bright white spot on my violent skin. Didn't anyone ever teach you how to use sunblock? she laughed, and then she laughed and laughed and laughed.

I gave her a fake frown and turned away to finish my toga. When I was done, I helped her make hers cover the essential parts. You don't have to stare, she said.

I'm not staring, I said. I don't need to.

I pulled the swath of sheet wide across her, and she stayed still while I moved around her back and tied a knot at her collarbone to keep it in place. I feel really on display, she said.

You love it, I said and pulled off my socks and slid my cold feet into my clunky oxfords. I said, And your lip is twitching.

Is it? Emma said. She ran into the bathroom and back out again. I can't remember what I was looking for, she said. We stood there in our togas.

Bet you never thought, I said.

She looked up at me, and her smile had changed, gone feral. But then she caught herself and ran past me. Come now, she said.

We hurried back up to the bar, holding our skirts up so we wouldn't trip, and my shoes felt very big clomping away on the stone under my toga. Ahead of me, Emma kicked a laundry pin, and we laughed because now we knew that that was the noise we had heard that had sent us running.

Everyone at the bar had moved to the dance floor, where Manolis had a row of people in togas in a line in the middle. The bouzouki music was frantic. He saw Emma. One more woman! he shouted to her, and someone else reached out, and someone else, and Emma was pulled in to the crowd. I peeked between heads. Manolis got Emma right next to him, and he crossed his arm through hers and over her shoulders, and then did the same with the beautiful woman next to him. The woman was Raja. And then the women linked up the next men and on down the line. All of their arms made one long muscular serpent, and Emma and Raja both saw me and tried to wave but their arms were tangled up in Manolis's arms and each others'. Manolis showed everyone their dance, kicking his legs out and ducking down and leaping into the air, and they all caught on. Opa! he called out. Someone started the

music again, and the crowd said, Opa! Opa! and they danced their dance. Zorba the Greek again, loud. Everyone snapped their fingers and clapped along.

Opa! Opa!

At the bar stood Patrick and Sharon Moulder, and I went to them and we wrapped our arms around each other. I'm sorry I'm so drunk, I said.

They laughed. Sharon said into my ear, It doesn't seem you'll need it but the offer still stands.

Thank you, I said.

Patrick said, The girls will be positively gutted if you don't at least pay a visit.

I will, I will, I said. Now let's get us something to drink.

It became very late and very early, and almost everyone stayed at the bar. Cara Moulder was plainly drunk from across the dancefloor, and had gotten up the nerve to talk to Gerald. Emma danced with Manolis. I talked with Patrick and Sharon, and they told me they too had just that day gone to Spinalonga, and Patrick said he'd gone for a swim in the sea while the girls took another look at the ruins, and Sharon asked me if I didn't see that sad cemetery, and didn't I know something about them? Then we talked for a long time about the different angle at which my bungalow faced the sea compared to theirs, and we nodded very seriously when we talked, and it was decided that first thing in the morning we would all have a look, and if the angle was everything that I was describing, then we would see to it that Patrick and Sharon move into that room as soon as me and Emma checked out. Patrick and Sharon went off to

bed and said to look after the girls, and I said okay, and then I sat down at the bar next to Raja.

You've kept me waiting so long, she said and was a little drunk. Her toga was slipping on the side near me, and her flesh was out in full view, but she had her bikini on underneath.

Yours is the best one, I said.

This old thing? she said.

I lit two cigarettes and gave one to her. That same stupid thing that I'd done when we had been outside Sorrento the first night, and she closed her eyes to recognize the gesture. She found it somewhere behind her dark eyelids.

I really thought something was going to happen between us, she said and smoked. I was a little worried.

I laughed. Me too, I said. It kept me up some nights.

Glad that's past us.

Indeed, I said. We all just need to make it back home.

You're leaving right away after?

Soon, I said.

Oh, she said.

Maybe not for a couple of days, I said.

Oh? she said. You'd come and visit me?

I could, I said. If I knew where you worked, I could just stop by one afternoon after we've both slept this all off.

Ah, she said. Then I'd have to tell you where I work.

That would probably be the case, I said and finished off whatever it had been that I was drinking. There was in my hand an empty glass, but not memory of it.

Nikos was not the bartender Manolis was, and Manolis was still out on the dancefloor, now teaching people a new dance where a line of people strode forward in formation. They had moved past the traditional Greek folk material and were on to Eruodisco. Raja and I waited for our drinks to be refilled. Nikos seemed to be working very hard but getting nowhere. I signaled for him, and he looked up, and I made the motion to indicate another round, and he stared my way for a second as though he had never seen me before.

Damn, she said. I have some wine in my room. Should have brought it with me.

Cara Moulder was at a table now with her sister, and Nadine was pleading with Cara in a sober way, and I could not see Gerald anywhere.

I said, We could use that wine right now.

Raja turned to me. We could just go have one quick drink and run back.

I think we could make it there and back and be just in time for our drinks to arrive, I said.

Let's then, Raja said and she stood up and I took a drag and put out my cigarette, and looked over before I stood up, and Gerald was right there, and he'd caught Raja by the arm.

Hey, he said.

There you are, Raja said. I was just coming to look for you.

Well here I am, he said.

Have a drink, Gez? she said and moved back to the bar. He held onto her. I lit another cigarette and eased back on my stool.

No, I'll wait, Gerald said. I'm just going to sit down right here and wait, he said and then he looked behind him and there was a small chair next to a big blue urn on the floor. Coming out of it was a potted plant like the one at the pool, with its gray skin and dark rubber roses. Gerald sat down in the chair, kicked out his feet, and folded his arms. We looked at him, and he looked at us. Go on, he said to Raja. Have a spot at the bar.

Raja had not moved, her arm still hung out as though Gerald held it, and her eyes were wide open.

Go right ahead, Gerald said calmly and then he smiled and his eyebrows moved out in great batflapping arcs.

Raja melted and sat back down on her barstool. Nikos brought us ouzo on ice and Amstels, and I looked down at Gerald and he was draining a bottle of beer down his tipped-back throat.

Promise me you'll do what I say, Raja said to me as a hard, hardly whispered rasp, as desperate as anything I'd heard her say. No matter what, she said. Meet me at my room, in ten minutes. Do you remember where it is?

I do, I said.

We looked at our drinks then, and we drank them, and I set mine down and swallowed. Raja kept on, tipped it all the way back so the ice came loose from the glass bottom and hit her in the mouth. She set the glass down. Her eyes were aimed at me, but they weren't picking up anything, and she smiled and bit her bottom lip and burped. She laughed and waved her hand in front of her mouth, and she looked very seriously at me in the way that a blind person does when they are listening, intent without creasing her brow. Her pupils were jumping, but everything else about her said she was calm and meant what she was about to say. Then she spoke, and did nothing to hide her words. She said, I really need to be properly fucked.

Then she fell off the back of her stool.

She hit the floor on her tailbone, and her right shoe was still hooked to the barstool, and Gerald stood up, and I stood up, and he said her name in the unprettiest way. Her toga skirt was around her neck, and I looked at her thighs and where they met at her French bikini bottom, and then I tried not to look at her thighs. Gerald threw the skirtsheet over her crotch and yelled at her to get up, but she had begun to cry, because she was really hurt or because Gerald had yelled at her, it was hard to say. He pulled her up and away, and did she look my way, give me a knowing wink, or did I miss it? He ran her to the door, and they argued, but all that came to me was the anger of their pantomime through the disco music and between the heads of

everyone between us, and I did not pretend to be doing anything else except for looking at them. Then they were gone, and in a minute, or five, or fifteen, Gerald was back, and I did not see Raja again.

Gerald threw himself down again in the chair next to the plant, and I found a chair from one of the tables and pulled it next to his and sat down, too.

I know it isn't you, he said.

I'm sorry, I said.

If anyone would understand what I'm dealing with, mate, it'd be you, he said.

I looked up at the bar, and my ouzo was still there. And my cigarettes.

Gerald said, You can have her for all I care.

Pardon me? I said.

Tell me the name of the place you went to, he said. The brothel. The Poseidon, right?

Right, I said.

Well, let's go, Gerald said. His eyes were quaking in booze. It was the first time I had realized, because now I was so drunk, too. Let's get on down to the old Poseidon, Gerald said.

I'm not going anywhere, I said.

Oh, right, Gerald said. You need to stay here with Raja.

I'm just going to stay here in the bar, Gerald, I said.

He laughed, and his chin sunk into the fat of his neck in a hiccup. Forever?
You can't stay here forever.

I stood up and the room tipped away from me. I lunged forward and my foot caught, and I moved to the door across the swiftly tilting ground. And then I was at the front desk, on the phone, calling a taxi for Gerald to the Poseidon.

MANOLIS AND I were the last ones in the bar. It seemed to fit. Manolis was telling me all the books I should read, and was telling me about Plato, and how to be an amateur was important to the creation of art. He told me that I needed to have love of language, and he gave a word for it. Philologia was a friend to language as philosophia was a friend to thought. He said that anything that was not a pursuit of the soul was not worthwhile.

Good art cannot be art, he said and I agreed with everything all along the way. Manolis brought out a private stash of raki from under the bar. He kept it in a blue plastic canister like the chamber under a car hood for antifreeze, and he had a sandwich bag wrapped around the spout with rubber bands. He told me that raki was made by heating the leftover skins from winegrapes in a cauldron, sealed except for a tiny exhaust tube, and then the vapors were cooled in ice, and so it had to be kept and drunk very, very cold. He said if I drank only raki, I would never have another hangover in my life. He said, This is the pure stuff. He set out a couple of shot glasses and poured from the canister into a carafe that he left on the bar. We drank. It was very good raki, and there was no taste that followed it at all.

Manolis wanted to gossip, and he told me stories about wild nights at the hotel to get me to tell my own. But there was nothing to tell. He upped the stakes, and told me about a night when he was nearly ripped apart by two wild women, mother and daughter from Oslo. I still didn't have anything to give him. Then he started talking about the guests. He named everyone at the bar that night with mythological names. Called Sharon Moulder Hera, and said she was the mother of everyone, and called Emma Aphrodite and Raja Athena, and Gerald Narcissus, and we laughed, and himself Poseidon and me Charon. He told me again I needed to learn Greek so I could understand. He said that the word cemetery came from the Greek for sleeping place, and he said that nostalgia was a disease, from the Greek nostos, which meant homecoming, and algos, which meant intense grief. He said that he could see that Emma had this disease and that it was impossible to cure, and he was afraid that I had somehow caught it, too.

Why do you get to be Poseidon? I said.

Because it sounds cool, he said.

I think you're the last Greek philosopher, I said.

What do you think of that raki? he said. How was that going down?

It's the best, I said.

Well, Manolis said. Let's kill it. You better pick one of the womens and go there before you get drunk.

I OPENED THE CREAKING DOOR and blue light opened up before me. Emma was in my room, which was not really a room, on my bed, which was not really a bed, and she lay on her back asleep in her toga, as though laid out on a catafalque and I was to pay my last respects. I stepped out of my shoes and closed the door behind me. I stood in the darkness. My eyes adjusted, and she was still there.

I went softly over the tile toward her room and the other bed, but she moved the sheets. She sat straight up.

Where are you going? she said softly.

I'm just going to bed, I said.

This is your bed, she said.

It is.

Why don't you come sleep in it with me?

Do you know who it is? I said.

Alex, she said. It's Alex.

I sat down on the bed. It's late, I said.

No it's not, she said. It's early, she said. She slid her arms through mine and around me, and she gave me a hug and lay her head on my shoulder.

You were already asleep, I said.

She shook her head. Her hair tickled my chest. She said, I was just lying here thinking about you.

In the back of my head, not my brain but just my head, I began to feel something I can only call a buzz, something I had not felt for a long time. I closed my eyes and was in my skin.

Then she pulled me on top of her and worked my toga apart, patiently, and I was over her on my hands and knees and let her do it. Her own top moved its way to the middle, and she was exposed, and I watched her body and her hands.

Something please you? she said.

What would ever give you that idea?

No clue, she said. She pushed me up on my haunches and took my hands and moved them to her breasts.

I said, They were a terrific purchase. Even though I opposed the idea.

You were right, she said. You don't buy new tits and keep the same boyfriend. But now they are yours again, to do with as you please.

I'll do my very best, I said.

She rolled back and pulled off her panties, and I got out of my toga and my boxers, and she leaned back, and then we were together again for the first time in three years. I was thinking hard on this most elusive moment, but I could not even put my mind on it. Instead we moved around each other, knowing each other, and it was familiar and very, very strange. We had sex and it was love and fucking and the release of chemicals, and it was a ship crashing against the rocks. My hand knew her breast. My mouth knew her throat, her neck, her ear. I kissed her eyes, I kissed her mouth. She was loud. It was the end.

We started for another time, but then without saying so, we both felt that we would spoil what we'd already done. We lay in bed and talked for a long time, and then we fell asleep together and were safe. What we talked about I would never remember.

KATHARO

POUNDING AT THE DOOR, the knob rattling like it was alive. I flew up, out of bed, awake, but it was only my body moving. The room did not look like anywhere I had ever been. My heart pounded. My throat rattled. I was in a white room, standing on the cool tile. I did not seem to have any clothes. There were my boxers, in a wad of sheets. I pulled them on and sat on the bed. This was my bed, in my room. The bungalow. Togas on the floor disguised as bedsheets and tangled with the bedsheets. With this my body eased, and the blood rushed instead to my head and throbbed, and there was a whistle in my skull just behind my left eye. Something hit the door again, and I was back up on my feet, and the doorknob clanged.

Goddamnit, man! Wake up!

Gerald. This was my room. Was Raja here? Was this my room? This was my room. Me and Emma. It was me and Emma. But where was she? I looked in the other room. Her bed was made. I dug through the togas.

Get the fuck out of bed! said Gerald on the other side of the door.

I threw open my suitcase and pulled on clothes. Be right there, I said to the door. If we were going to fight, I was not going to do it naked. I buckled my belt, buttoned my shirt. Held my hand on the doorknob. Then I put on socks and shoes.

Come on!

Right here, I said and pulled the door wide and stood back. Gerald had on red pants and sneakers and an ugly tourist T-shirt with a goat in profile and text that said Kriti Krikri, and he seemed to be leaning forward, his hands made into fists.

What the fuck is this? Gerald said and we looked down together at the hotel kittens and a ripped apart fish on the stone. They batted the needlebones with their paws. You feeding the animals? Gerald said.

I suppose I am, I said and remembered the bag from Pete and George. I touched my nose, and a whiff of fish rushed in.

Alright, mate, let's be off, Gerald said. Then he looked at me. You are in a right state, he said. Get your sunglasses. You'll need them.

I got them. And we did not fight.

We passed through the lobby, where Irini and Manolis were playing backgammon at the front desk table, and when we went by Manolis stood up to say hello and knocked over his drink, a cold foamy coffee with a seagreen straw, and Irini picked up her frappe and blotted the linen on the table. I stopped to say something, and Gerald said to come on, and Manolis and I shrugged to each other and I went out the door. There was a taxi waiting, and I got in the back, and Gerald got in the front. We headed toward Aghios Nikolaos.

It was not an ordinary hangover that had descended upon me, but rather something that peeled my scalp apart like thumbs in the flesh of an orange. There was nothing left of me. All of the water in my skin cooked away as we lurched down the hill. I put a cigarette in my mouth, and the skin of my lips split. When I touched my

mouth, there was blood filling the swirls of my fingerprints. I wiped my mouth and got the cigarette going.

Gerald turned back to me, but did not say anything.

At the car hire on the harbor road, Gerald made the arrangements and I stood outside to smoke and leaned against a lime-streaked tour bus that said Ghournia on its busted marquee. I did not remember anything about hiring a car with Gerald. But there I was. And where was Emma? But I did not want to speak to her just then. There was no way I could speak to her. Five or six more hours of sleep. And food. Then I could say something about last night, if anything needed to be said about last night. My nerves moved through me like an electric storm, and doom narrowed my eyes, and there was disaster in the cauldron of my stomach.

Gerald came out of the shop with two open-faced motorcycle helmets and sets of keys, and he tossed me one of the keyrings and it hit me in the chest and tinkled on the blacktop. He gave me a helmet and led me to the scooters that lined the road, which were where I had been looking. I had been looking at them all in a row, a fleet of old Vespas with bright new blue and pink and yellow paint, and I had not looked at anything else, but I had not seen them.

You're not backing out now, Gerald said.

It's been a while since I've ridden one of these, I said. Which was true, in that I had only ridden one once and tipped it over onto a lawn. Gerald gave me a helmet and I held it in two hands in front of me.

That's not what you said last night, Gerald said and climbed on the yellow one.

Now certainly he was mistaken. Or he knew something about me and Raja. What about last night, did I say something to Raja last night? Why would I have said anything about Vespas. What was Gerald trying to get at, exactly?

Gerald, I'm not so—

I'm not going to let you ride on the back of mine if that's what you're looking for, Gerald said.

My brain screeched like a horn. Which one's mine, I said.

Whichever, Gerald said. The keys are all the same.

I sat down on a red one and put on my helmet. If I was still drunk, I would probably live in the event of an accident. When you are drunk, you don't tense up at the moment of impact, do not resist the crash. Do not think to worry.

I watched Gerald turn the ignition on his Vespa, and I found mine. It came back to me. The scooter buzzed like a schoolbell underneath me. Where are we going? I said, but I could not hear even my own words.

We turned out onto the road and its phantom slicks of reflected sky, climbed up into Ag Nik, and my scooter choked as it scaled the curved road. I nearly jerked it to the ground, but pulled the throttle, and the scooter jumped underneath me and I was racing back up to Gerald, and we turned inland on the road to Heraklion, and then took the first turn. Kritsa, 30 km.

When you leave Ag Nik, the town disappears quickly. You do not see houses. There are none. There is a motel with a palm tree, an apartment building with no palm tree, and ahead of you is a single road and the grassy treeless scrabble of ground

around you for miles, and then hills, but here you do not see the mountains, because suddenly you are upon them. Suddenly the road is smooth and ripe tar black, and all the road sound is gone, and there is only the whir of rubber tire and the engine like a bell underneath you and wind that now sounds like a breeze. Around you the air is quickly cool but the sky is bright as ever.

I followed Gerald as though tethered to him. A long way of staring at the back of his Kriti Kriki T-shirt. When I turned to look at the land, the scooter went there, too, wherever I looked, and so I looked back to the T-shirt. We made sleepy esses through the flat terrain, past a few cava markets and dwellings, and the road suddenly snaked up and tightened, and we worked our way hard into the hills. The road here was bad and loud, sloped toward the center to take away the rain, when there was rain. And then we were in among rock hills with trees like tall bushes with clouds of blueblack leaves. Up the next turns, we rode through where the hill was carved away and showing faces of soft dark orange clay. And the cliff faces grew fast, the road shot up higher. The cliffs over the road were thirty, forty, then fifty feet tall, and the corners were so sharp as to require nearly a full stop. And then ahead there was the sign for the town of Kritsa.

It clings to the side of the mountain, with the single road stitched through it, so narrow you feel like you could reach out and touch the buildings on both sides. But here there are cafés and shops, and the verandas are like stairsteps in a case. Bolts of lace in every window. Then there are T-shirt shops, and the postcard spinners, and still everything is in English, and the vertical rise between next door neighbors is ten feet each, and all the buildings are like bookspines.

In one shop a woman pulled a lace headwrap together under her chin, in among the shawls and doilies and tablecloths. Sitting by the road were the citizens of the town. An old man with a wool fisherman's cap sat in front of his closed garage on a footstool. And there was an incredibly beautiful woman on the side of the road, in all black and wearing big sunglasses and with her very tan cleavage exposed. She sat with a teacup on a saucer in her lap, and was sitting with someone who was just a dark blurry fuzz. And then we passed another café, where a girl was watering the hanging arrangement that was next to my ear suddenly, and we were climbing again.

I looked back down on her from the next turn, as though from a balcony above, the angle was so severe, and the girl watering flowers had the prettiest face, and I wanted to save her from Kritsa and forgot about the widow with the cleavage. There was a last stone hovel, a block of concrete set like a family vault in the earth with steps and a welcome mat, and an unyielding slope of yard, and Kritsa was behind us.

There was a very faded sign. Katharo Plateau 46 km. We slowed, and Gerald looked behind us and I looked too. Ag Nik looked abandoned and bright, and there were no big boats or small boats or any churned foam on Mirabello Bay, and the sea was dark and full of beasts, very far in the distance. And I looked straight down, the road a hundred feet below me, and there was a bright green soccer pitch, and I was struck with how wet the color and how strange it was to have such a piece of flat land up here that went out from the mountain like a countertop.

Soon there was a little black goat by the side of the road, then another, then one with orange wool and hair on its head like a man's toupee, and they wore bells that plunked instead of rang. A stone cottage flashed past us in the hills. The road

leveled and we moved quickly inland, the road and hills sprayed with tiny stones. And we passed a hill terraced with big stone, and on every level were dozens of little yellow sheep with dreadlocks of lank wool, tiny black legs under the yellowed mass. Little ugly legs like Gerald's. I followed his T-shirt and was menaced by my not knowing what he wanted with me. We passed a few still goats and rode up a long, low rise, and there was nothing but that for a long, long time.

Here we made a sweeping curve into a mountain pass, and then we were on the plateau. Dry but pretty. We descended into a bowl in the mountains, where the land was sectioned into fields and each home was in the thick of orchards and gardens. In one, cabbages overgrown on splints as tall as a man. The earth here was very dry, and each home had a large pit to collect the rainwater, and we crossed a bridge over a riverbed, and it was a trickle of gravelly mud. Around us the hills were bare of vegetation, and scattered with the little blades of rock. Ahead hung a sign on a chicken-wire fence, a red arrow, with something written only in Greek, and Gerald turned off where the arrow said to go. This was where he planned to kill me, in a land where no English was known.

We did not find out what the arrow meant to show but instead found the nearest taverna, the only one, which looked like an alpine inn. It had no name. We killed the scooters and our hands were numb from the vibration. Gerald took off his helmet, and he was smiling. His movie-star hair was flat.

Isn't this the most beautiful place you've ever been? he said.

Sure, I said.

We sat down at a picnic table outside the stone inn. A girl brought out two glasses of a sweet, milky drink that tasted of almonds. Gerald ordered some souvlaki and ouzo and I said no way could I drink ouzo, but he said I had to, because we needed a drink while he told me what he had to say. Then while we waited for the food and for him to say what he had to say, we smoked cigarettes, and he told me something about Manolis I would have never otherwise known.

Crete had been a crucial strategic base of war for thousands of years, Gerald told me. Look at this now, he said and we looked around. For those thousands of years, the people of Crete retreated into the hills whenever they were attacked, by every empire, and they came to places like the Katharo Plateau and lived completely off the land around them. When the Turks captured Crete, and built Spinalonga, the Cretans they captured became their slaves, along with all of the other Greeks, and to each of the captured Greeks' last names they added a suffix to denote their new status, and it was because the Greeks had been conquered so many times that their names had grown so long.

In the second World War, Hitler wanted Crete, too, but it was much harder to take than expected. For months the Cretans fought guerrilla warfare and hid in the hills, and attention that Hitler would have rather spent on the Russian front was instead devoted to Crete. But the people kept on retreating into the hills. So Hitler burned the hills, and everything else, and so there were no more trees on Crete.

But what about Manolis? I said.

Do you know his last name? Gerald said.

No.

It's Maris.

And?

Gerald said, Manolis is from a line of people who have lived on Crete for as long as it's been here, and has never been captured.

Did Manolis tell you this?

Well, yes, but— Gerald said and our drinks were there. He raised his glass. Cheers, mate, he said. Thanks for coming with me.

I sat back. Glad to be here, I said.

Gerald drank. He said, You'd never guess where I woke up this morning?

In the Poseidon? I said.

No, no, he said. I did go there actually, last night, or at least tried to. It was all boarded up. No sign of life.

I said, Then where?

Gerald shook his head but he was grinning. He said, You know those girls you had me get the autograph for?

They're kids, I said.

She's nearly eighteen, Gerald said.

I swallowed my drink and got up.

Where are you going?

I got on the scooter and did not say anything, and Gerald was after me, saying something, but I couldn't hear him. I was already six thousand miles away.

EVER FALLEN IN LOVE

I WAS HOME in August. My friends noted my dark skin, and for awhile I wore Crete like brine. At the bar, I told the story of the night I went to the Poseidon. You only need to think with your dick, I said and everyone laughed. Then there was normalcy. I sat at new restaurants with new women, where we looked at each other across strategic towers of food for which I suddenly had no appetite, and then I'd go out alone to the street vendors at three in the morning for shawarmas with chili sauce. Alone, I made mashed potatoes at home and fell backward into sleep like nascence. I went to a party on Halloween, dressed as myself when I was sixteen, and I woke up in a strange bed with strange hair fanned over the pillow next to me, and I walked home in the middle of the night. No one would drink ouzo with me. Then I forgot about ouzo and went back to whiskey. I tried to keep oddity, but it fell away like skin. I looked around and everything was right there, where it was supposed to be, but what did not seem to fit anymore was me. And then that moment passed and I was ashamed of the ego it took to think that way, and the hours turned, businesslike, loveless, agreeable, healthy.

In my car I sang along to an old tape Emma had made for herself when she lived on Crete, something I'd taken without her knowing from a box of other things when she was moving back to England, away from me for the first time. They used to be my least favorite songs. I pulled out from 14th Street, from my house in Hyde Park,

Boise, Idaho, and drove down 15th, where the road was lined with dark frozen trees without leaves, and through downtown, and I was singing loud about love as I took the turn up Americana Boulevard and rode the long low rise up toward cool winter sky. Here is the bench of land above the city, once orchards but now crowded with homes and their views, and right at this first corner is the cemetery. Who ever thought that the anthem of your whole life could be summed up in three minutes by the Buzzcocks?

You take the south entrance and drive between the brick columns and through the black iron gates. It is something like a big park in the middle of a neighborhood, where people run their dogs and jog, and the trees are bigger than anywhere else in the city, but then there are the monuments and it is a very different place. You will find whatever you want to find in a cemetery in November, with the slate sky over the black branches, and the thousands of headstones breaking through the brown lawn like nothing on earth but headstones. But I was still singing about love. I could still choose good music, fun, Neil Diamond, Sorrento.

Before, in London, I sat on my suitcase in front of Emma's flat and waited for a taxi, wool coat across my lap and smoking a cigarette from a dry, dusty pack she'd found in a kitchen drawer. There was no one else on the road, and parked cars and dustbins and identical, semi-detached North London went on in waves forever under that summer's only sunny sky. She came out after awhile. I was still there. She stood next to me, looking out at the road, and I touched her calf, and then the taxi was there and she went inside.

Moving back, before that, was the train from Victoria Station, where we stood at the front of the traincar, and the window between cars was open and blasted hot midnight subway air. She looked down, away, and her hair flew out and spun toward me, reaching to me, past me, around my face behind hers on the train. Her arms stayed straight at her sides, suitcase in one hand and the Belgian's stereo in the other, and her hair flew at me. We looked in on the car ahead of us, lit from inside like a quaking house, and it rocketed forward and turned and we chased it through the long holes in the earth.

And earlier, at Gatwick, we rode the escalator down to the overground train and Raja Ferjani and Gerald Coulthard stayed on the platform above.

At Gatwick, Raja wore a small white shirt that showed a band of pink belly, and turquoise tracksuit pants, and tennis shoes from Japanese anime, and Gerald was dressed like Gerald, the same way they had been dressed at the hotel on Crete, but this would be the last time I would see either of them, and they stood with their bags between them. We did not talk at the gate, and we did not talk on the plane, as she was forty rows behind me, and when we all met again to collect our luggage, Raja whispered to me about how on the plane she had been surrounded by the whole of East London, and I said yeah, and that was the last damn thing. Emma and I got on the escalator. Gerald and Raja did nothing and said nothing to each other. I went down with the flowing stairs and Raja disappeared above me.

We had said goodbye, all of us, to each other, at the lobby of the hotel on Crete, and Emma said something about how brown we had all gone, and Gerald looked worried. He said he was supposed to be ridden for the next thirteen episodes,

and we laughed like we were supposed to laugh. We were all very charming to each other. Emma and Raja shook each other's hands. It was a very charming scene.

And a full day later I touched Emma's calf, on the curbside of Victoria Road, New Barnet, Hertfordshire, postcode EN4 9PH.

And then more time passed, and I sang about love in my car on the arterial cemetery road.

Once inside Morris Hill Cemetery, you keep Frank Church on your right and the military section ahead of you, and the markers lead you to Section J, a neighborhood of old monuments. In the middle is a black granite slab that marks the final resting place of Otto Krahn, who could not have known that his grandson would illegally sell the deeds of the family plot back to the city. Otto Krahn was dead a hundred years before my father bought those plots and buried my mother, his wife, in one of them.

You can walk on the graves. But if you wish to sit it is polite to ask permission. If you look for the yellow rosebush, you will find a smaller sloped stone engraved like the marquee of an Egyptian theater, and you will find my mother there, still, to this day.

IT BEGINS on the harbor of Aghios Nikolaos, my first night on Crete, and I remember myself on the bridge and not sure if I should go back to the hotel or to another place, perhaps somewhere I have never been. It is before I've met Gerald and Raja, or perhaps it is after, but Raja has not yet become Raja for me.

It is the night before the Poseidon. Emma and I are together for the first time in three years, far away from home, and we are out in the city together. There is a pirate ship in the water, and Neil Diamond on a stereo, motorcycles squawking, and Emma has gone off to find us a taxi, before we know to go straight to the queue.

I stand on the bridge and breathe the lake and the sea. Then a gunshot rings out through the black, and all the heads turn to the far side of the harbor from which I have just come. For a moment, nothing. A disco song pulses from an open balcony above. Neil Diamond rocks on, touching warm. Then comes the distant European ambulance siren, over the hill, beyond the Spinalonga ferries and Ela, and it grows louder, an alarm responding in the night to our terror and I move into a crowd and all around the wind swirls up off the sea. No one asks what is going on. It is going to come right over the hill. The alarm goes on, and then there is a clamor like crashing, and we look up the streets, all of us quiet, up Octavriou 28 Road and a jeep honks and the crowd parts around it, and behind it come motorbikes and other jeeps, flashing headlights. The crowd around them suddenly begins to cheer. The ambulance comes over the hill, and now the procession races down to the water, and we all leap back onto the sidewalks on the bridge, and the people around me cheer. The jeep horns blare and the motorbikes ring out and the ambulance bounds past, and then a truck with people standing in the bed, trailing cans from strings and streaked with wedding paint. A rocket shoots into the air, a sucking blast into the sky, and it bursts open in light, then another, another and another, and they whistle up and pop and shower the city with sparks of blue and red and orange and white, and the colors streak across the shimmering pane of black water. I look out over the water, and there is a woman

moving toward me along the promenade, the only one not staring at the show overhead. A rocket cracks, and the light fills the street behind her, and she is only a shape, and I know the form to be Emma's, flashing dark against the light. She moves past a shop window and is herself lit up. I see her face. She is moving forward but lost in memory, smiling to herself, after everything that had led us here but before anything else has happened.