

Copyrighted Material

THEN

IT'S TOO HOT to be outside for long. Sweat is starting to dampen my scalp, thickening in the roots of my hair and pooling in the crevices of my collar bone. My t-shirt sticks to my spine and my arms are tinged pink, an ungainly line of skin beginning to blister along the top of my thigh in the almost unseasonable blaze of sun. I curl my toes into the damp sand and feel the sharpness of a small shell against the sole of my foot.

Please, don't let him have left without me, *I think*, I'll do anything. I need him to come for me.

From my spot on the sand I can just make out the dock. Rising out of the sea is the rickety wooden platform where I disembarked months ago, seasick and tired. A small boat is tethered there, bright blue and bobbing in the slow swell of the tide. It will leave in ten minutes, and I am supposed to be on it.

When I arrived here this morning the dock was quiet. Now there is a bustle of activity, a queue of impatient tourists ready to embark. The waves edge close to my legs and dampen the ground beneath my heels. I shiver as saltwater laps the tip of my toe.

Just a few more minutes. Just a few more minutes and he'll be here.

'Rachel!'

Someone is waving one arm in my direction, their figure silhouetted against the brightness of the sky. I lift one hand to shield my eyes and see that it's Helena. She's walking quickly, half jogging, and as she collapses down next to me her chest heaves, her breath tangled up in her throat. Her hair is damp and salt crystals are beginning to form and glitter at her neck, a white and grainy sheen that edges in one long streak from her jaw down to her collar bone.

'They came for him,' she says, her voice ragged and airless. 'This morning.'

I'm already shaking my head, clambering to my feet.

'No,' I say.

'They didn't find him. He'd already left. He got away.'

It takes a moment for me to find the words, for the shapes that Helena's mouth makes to form into something resembling meaning.

'He can't have.'

'I've been to the house. Everything's gone.'

'You're lying.'

'We knew this would happen, Rachel. We knew they'd come for him, in the end.'

I gather up my bags, staggering in my hurry to get away. She opens her mouth as if to say something before I go, one arm raised up as if to catch me, and then seems to think better of it. There's nothing she can say to stop me now.

My things are too heavy as I tumble up the beach. My shoes catch in the sand and I bend down to tug them off. I throw them on to the ground so that I can dash to the road, away from Helena and towards him. I flag down a car, a local man who pulls up looking concerned at me, barefoot and weighed down by too many things. I splutter out an address and then hold out a wad of notes, my entire boat fare.

'Please,' I say. 'I'll pay you.'

He shakes his head, obviously misreading my distress as something more sinister. It takes me a moment to remember that it is.

'No money,' he says. 'I'll take you home.'

As his car veers up the hillside and away from the dock, I try to compose myself. I take deep, desperate breaths, sucking in air through my nose and exhaling in long hard gasps. My face is wet, and when my tears reach my lips they taste as salty as the sea. As the driver wrenches the steering wheel in a way that only someone who has grown up around these vertiginous roads can, he glances anxiously in the rear-view mirror.

'Everything OK?' he asks.

I nod.

'It will be,' I say. 'It has to be.'

How many times have I climbed the hill to this white-painted house, spent the night, left early in the morning with my head spinning? I remember the first time, when he sent a car to pick me up and I wore the nicest dress I had with me. It was flowing and white, and I felt like a Greek goddess. But then of course, that was before. Before the whispers started to curdle the summer air like an impending rainstorm. Before police descended on the island, their uniforms oppressive and dark beneath the midday sun. Before the body washed up, broken on the beach. I heard she had been there for hours by the time they found her, her skin swollen by the sea, her face no longer recognizable.

'Here?' the man says.

I nod and wipe my sodden cheeks.

'Here.'

I abandon my bags at the roadside and rush towards the wooden door. I can already see that it is open. He would never just leave it like that. He worries endlessly about locking up the bar at night. I call out his name as I step into the cool shade of the entrance hall. At first it looks the same: the wrought-iron statue on the side table, the white rug at the bottom of the stairs. Yet his keys are missing from the bowl next to the door, his jacket no longer hanging and ready for him to throw on against the evening chill. I dash upstairs, still calling out for him.

I'm sobbing by the time I reach his bedroom: guttural, animal-like noises. The wardrobe doors are thrown open, shirts scooped off their hangers as if by someone who left in a hurry. Sheets have been torn off the bed and a fallen lamp sits in pieces on the floor as though whoever broke it didn't have time to clean up. A door to a balcony has been left ajar and thin curtains drift lazily in the breeze, their movement absurdly calm against the chaos he has left behind.

For a moment it feels like everything should stop. The world is still spinning. The sun is still shining. But he is gone. I lie stomach-down on his bed and try to capture the smell of him. I breathe in hoping to find the remnants of his aftershave, a small part of him still left behind, but the white expanse of the mattress only smells of detergent. I wail into a discarded pillow, not worried about who will hear, my body arching into the bed. Around me the house remains cavernous and still, as though nobody has lived here for years. As though none of us were ever here at all.

NOW

THE HEAT IS unbearable.

It crawls into my lungs and knots itself in the damp folds of flesh beneath my clothes. It slickens against my skin and leaves streaks of sweat on the backs of my thighs. I waxed my legs in anticipation of this holiday, conscious of how my pale skin would look in the sunlight. Perhaps I was conscious of more than that, hoping this trip would reignite some of the heat that has been missing from my marriage. Instead, I look across at my husband and feel faintly repulsed. His underarms are damp and staining the shirt he put on especially for our last night here. He's staring out at the sea, but I know he isn't seeing it the way I do. To him it could be anything. Any view, anywhere. To me the swell of the tide speaks of secrets, the salty air smelling irrevocably of promise.

The sea always reminds me of that summer. How the entire world had seemed within reach back then. I remember sitting with my toes in the sand, the vastness of an ocean stretching out before me, and feeling as though the whole universe was mine to be had.

'Shall we order more wine?' Tom asks.

I shake my head.

'I'm actually pretty tired. Let's get the bill.'

He nods and beckons the waiter over. He always does what I want him to. I used to like it, years ago. It used to be a relief, after everything. Now I wish that he wouldn't. That he would have his own thoughts and things to say. That he would tell me no. I think I am starting to be scared of what I might do if he doesn't.

'Ready?' he says.

I'm too young to be feeling like this, I think, but I nod and bend down to gather my bag. There are a lot of things that never get said between us. There may as well be one more.

We trudge back to the apartment block in silence. The strip that lines the beach is quiet at this time of night. The families who fill it in the daytime have already vacated the shops selling inflatable lilos and the restaurants that stock cheap wine and child-friendly pizza menus. The pavement is scattered with the remnants of days out, leftover sandwich packets and abandoned bottles of suncream. This part of town is the domain of tourists, of cheap package holidays and sun-worshippers. The coastline that was once quiet is now bloated with hotels and neon-fronted bars, concrete structures that threaten to obscure the peaceful slope of the town into the island's hills.

When Tom promised he'd book somewhere nice for dinner on our last evening I had hoped we'd go anywhere else. Perhaps to one of the inland restaurants that cater to the sprawling villas that cling to cliff faces and hillsides far away from the town, dimly lit and demurely designed to fade into the scenery. We've already spent most of the holiday metres away from here, stretched out on beach towels and stopping off to stuff ourselves with salty olives and feta on the way back to the apartment. When I realized that we were heading in this direction, my hand clutched in his and slightly clammy, I had clenched my mouth into a smile.

'I love this place!' I had enthused, and deposited a neat clean kiss on his cheek.

He had looked painfully pleased with himself and I found myself wishing that I hadn't bothered wearing my favourite summer dress, its thin straps chafing against my sunburnt skin.

The island has changed, but then so have I. Memory is funny like that. It weights places with a significance that slowly gathers pace over time. As I got further away from that summer, my recollections of this place became imbued with magic. I remembered arriving here by boat, the harbour bathed in a syrupy early evening glow and my shoulders slumping beneath the weight of my backpack. I remembered the taste of the local alcohol as I danced until my bones ached and my body felt weightless. I remembered the taste of his mouth, the heat of his skin, the feeling that if I didn't belong to him then I would die. The further away I got, the more mythical the island became in my imagination, a world where emotions were heightened until they almost hurt and every day was tinged with promise.

'You didn't think I'd forgotten, did you?'

I'm so caught up in remembering the past that I've barely noticed the present. Now that I look at my husband I can see that he's delighted by his surprise. He peers at me eagerly, waiting for my reaction.

'This is it, isn't it? The bar you used to work in?'

I recognize it at once, of course. It's still as ramshackle as it used to be, a tumble of wooden steps leading up to a squat building wrapped in a winding terrace. There's a lithe blurriness between the outdoors and the in, tables spilling on to the deck and the sound of the sea echoing off the walls. The doorway is ringed with fairy lights now, flower garlands hung up in a feeble nod towards some unidentifiable tropical theme. It

used to be grottier and busier. It used to feel bigger, as though it was the centre of gravity itself, the place the entire world orbited around.

I nod.

'Yes, but . . .'

'Well, you didn't think we were going to go the entire holiday without stopping off for a drink, did you? I'm surprised you weren't up on the bar our first night here, downing shots like nobody's business.'

He nudges me gently, and I can feel how hard he's trying.

'Honestly, Tom, I'm really tired . . .'

'Oh, come on. You've been telling me about this place for years. You think I'm going to let us go home without one drink?'

I look at him, and I see how desperately he wants me to be happy. He knows I've been despondent all holiday, even though he hasn't commented on it. We're not good at talking about how we feel, or what we think. He looks hopeful, as though this surprise might be the thing that fixes everything. I let out a small sigh.

'All right, one drink.'

It didn't used to be a cheap bar in a tacky tourist trap. Sixteen years ago this island was tucked away, reachable only by boat. It was frequented by the money- or time-rich; people who would escape from reality in holiday homes high up in the hills or stop off on their backpacking trips. Before anyone caught on to how the sea was the perfect kind of warm and the food was cheap and good, before the apartment blocks began to clamour for coastline and tourists began to demand pints of lager for a euro, this place felt secret and special. I used to know which tables got the coolest breeze and which sticky cocktails were the best value. I used to be able to reel off what beers we had on tap like a nursery rhyme and persuade

anyone who'd listen to buy one of the pricier bottles of wine. I used to be a different person entirely, not somebody's wife letting herself be guided into a bar that she does not want to go to. I wonder vaguely if my dress is too short as the wicker chair scratches the backs of my legs. I'm thirty-five in a few months. I was ridiculous for thinking that coming back would make me feel seventeen again.

'What can I get for you?'

A teenage girl with her hair tied up in a scrunchie thrusts a bowl of salted peanuts down between us. She wears a black t-shirt and her limbs are long and tanned.

'Wine?' Tom asks.

I shake my head.

'Tequila.'

I'm looking directly at the waitress, daring her to smirk at my drink choice, but I can still feel Tom raising his eyebrows. When you've been with someone for ten years, you don't need to see their face to know exactly what they're thinking.

'Tequila it is!' he says.

'Two?'

'Four,' I say, and the waitress nods and turns away.

Tom lets out a low whistle and leans in, even though there is barely anyone here and he could speak as loudly as he wanted to without being overheard.

'Thought you were tired?'

'Call it a nightcap.'

'Fine, fine.' He leans back again, a small smile playing at his lips. 'So. Go on then. Tell me all about your wild summer working here.'

And so I tell him all the things that don't matter, all the stories I've polished like sea glass over the years. I tell him about arriving here with my best friend Caroline, the summer before our A-Levels. We were supposed to be island hopping

before going back to college in September, but I stayed on. I tell him how this was the backpacker bar, the dirtiest drinking spot for those of us who passed through and ended up lingering, entranced by the slow and consuming charms of island life. I tell him about getting a job here, about how I had to make a Long Island Iced Tea as a test and mixed one so strong I almost choked on it. I tell him I fell in love and I let him think I mean with the island. He doesn't need to know about him. He doesn't need to know what I did.

'Four tequilas,' the waitress says as she places them down on top of napkins.

They come without lime or salt. We would have got hauled up for that, back in the day.

She slides the bill on to the table, scribbled in red pen on a torn till roll. Tom pulls out his wallet and counts coins into her hand. She nods in thanks and doesn't offer to bring him back change.

'Well, cheers. Last night of the holiday and all that.'

Tom holds up his shot to tap against the side of mine and then throws his tequila back with a grimace.

'Ooft. Been a while since I've had one of those. Takes me right back.'

He turns the glass upside-down on the table as if we are teenagers playing at drinking games. We never knew that part of each other. We had already seen too much by the time we met to be looking for fun. Our relationship was always characterized by a kind of seriousness that I used to think made us solid, dependable. As though we had been together for years before we had even begun.

'I need to go to the bathroom,' I say, my chair scraping against the stone floor as I stand.

'Not chickening out, are you?'

I pause to meet his eye and slowly lift a shot glass to my

mouth. I throw the drink down without breaking his gaze. It burns all the way to my stomach.

I don't need to ask anyone where to find the ladies. I know this place better than anywhere. I spent months living here and then years imagining it, my mind roaming back to the places my body could no longer go.

The toilets have been done up since then, the small and slightly dingy cubicles replaced with chrome and black-painted wood. It feels impersonal and wrong, an attempt at trendiness that is out of place. As I wash my hands I catch a glimpse of myself in the revamped mirror. There's a vague pulse of surprise that is becoming increasingly familiar with age, a tantalizing moment when I don't quite recognize myself. Somehow the shock of seeing I am getting older never seems to fade. I know I'm still young, really. Thirty-four is not old. And yet each barely there line beginning to claim space at the corners of my eyes, each grey hair that I find first thing in the morning and screech at Tom to come and pluck out, reminds me of the stasis that my life seems to have slipped into whilst my body starts to change.

'Is this it?' I say to the mirror.

The woman who stares back is silent. The last time I looked at my reflection in this room, a very different person would have returned my gaze. A bit drunk, perhaps. Blissfully happy. Enviably young.

'Is this what?'

Over the sound of a toilet flushing a woman blusters out of one of the cubicles. She's about my age, faintly smiling at this mad woman talking to herself in the bathroom as she plunges her hands beneath the tap.

'Nothing,' I say, suddenly embarrassed. I busy myself gathering a wad of paper towels to dry my hands. They never had hand dryers in here back then either. 'Just talking to myself.'

The woman looks up to meet my gaze in the mirror, and as she does her smile freezes. Her eyes widen and her lips part as though her words are stuck in her mouth.

'Rachel?' she manages. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'We're leaving.'

Tom looks up from toying with his phone in surprise.

'Right now?'

'Now.'

I hurriedly down my second shot and gesture for him to take my hand so that I can tug him away.

'But we only just—'

'Now, Tom.'

As always, he doesn't say no. We walk back to the apartment in silence. I found it on an online booking site, back when I was sick with enthusiasm about this holiday. It had been Tom who had suggested that we come here. It was a few months ago, an evening when we had sat in the garden in silence over dinner.

'You've obviously been down lately,' he had said gently. 'It might cheer you up.'

At first I had pulled a face. The island was mine, sacred in my memory. I didn't want to share it with Tom. For years I had carefully curated my recollections of the place, held them so close to me that the thought of going back had felt unimaginable. Sometimes the idea of returning would come to me, perhaps after a couple of glasses of wine or a hot, hazy evening when the scent of suncream momentarily made me yearn for that summer. When it did, I would quickly suppress it. I worried that seeing the island again would chip away some of the perfection I had assigned to it, that a rogue misremembered road or rubbish-strewn beach would knock the shine from its carefully sculpted veneer. Worse, perhaps I would see

other girls, infallibly young and impossibly beautiful, and be reminded that I wasn't the person I was when I was there last. Of the things that had forced me to leave.

Yet Tom's suggestion bedded a strange kind of hope deep within the pit of my stomach. I *had* been feeling down lately. Not myself. Maybe going back was what I needed. Maybe it was what *we* needed. Maybe being back would make me into the person I was sixteen years ago, the kind of person who loved fiercely and who ran into the sea at midnight just to see how it felt. I began to search flights, marvelling at how easy it was now and shaking my head in disbelief at the range of accommodation on offer. I settled on a simple self-catered place five minutes from the beach.

'We can afford somewhere nicer,' Tom had said bemusedly.

I had shaken my head.

'This is perfect.'

We had somewhere nice at home. We had saved and saved for our house, for an upholstered bed and a sofa you could sink so far into that you'd never want to move. Of course we could have stayed somewhere nicer, some all-inclusive resort that only touched the edges of island life. We could have drunk canned cocktails so sugary they hurt our teeth, and I could have come back without even stepping outside a hotel. But I had wanted to recapture some of the simplicity of my first trip here, when I stayed in a hostel where the water only ever ran freezing cold or scalding hot. I felt, somewhere deep inside me, that if we had fewer things then maybe our feelings would have more space to exist. There seemed so little room for them around mortgages and coffee machines and work emails.

When we booked the trip I had been excited, dizzy with the thought of revisiting those precious months. Yet as soon as we checked in I found myself avoiding the bar. I skirted around

the streets I used to walk down and dodged the places I used to know. There was a sickly sense of fear whenever I imagined seeing that place again. A strange and unsettled feeling that raged somewhere taut and implacable. A tightening of my throat made me stay away, even though I had truly thought I wanted to go back. A terrible knowledge that it would only remind me of how much time has passed since then. Of the disintegration of the girl I used to be.

'Do you want any water?' Tom asks.

'I'm OK.'

I close my eyes and feel the weight of him lower down beside me, the mattress groaning in protest. For a moment he is still, the sound of his breath stirring the humid air. Then he reaches over and places one hand on my hip, skimming the light cotton fabric of my dress.

'Did you take your temperature?' he asks.

'This morning.'

'And . . .?'

'Not yet,' I lie.

He pats my thigh and then plants a light kiss on my cheek before pulling away.

'OK, babe,' he says. 'Just thought it was about the right time. But what do I know?'

Then he clambers to his feet and I hear him potter to the bathroom. The extractor fan splutters and whirrs to life, noisy and clattering with effort, and the bright white strip light hung above the sink bleeds out into the bedroom.

As my husband hums to himself whilst he brushes his teeth and unbuttons his shirt, I lie quietly and wish I was anywhere but here. That woman in the bar knew my name and my face, but she wouldn't have recognized anything else about me. I didn't even know anyone had stayed behind. I thought we had all escaped, that we left our lives here still hopeful for a future

brimming with the same kind of excitement we had grown used to. But of course, we had learned that excitement emerges from the unknown, and with the unknown comes terrible secrets. The kind of secrets that made it hard to stay.

Tom ambles out of the bathroom, pulling off his shirt, and flops on to the bed beside me. He lies flat on his back so that I can feel the expansion of his breath against the bedsprings, smell the sourness of sweat cooling against his skin.

'You know,' he says. 'We could anyway.'

There is a silence broken only by the extractor fan, still trying valiantly to pump the damp and decay out of the ageing bathroom. It smells slightly mouldering, in spite of the air freshener the owner has dotted about in an attempt to hide how the apartment is crumbling behind its freshly scrubbed tiles and neatly ironed sheets.

'I'm tired,' I say at last. 'And we've got to be up to pack tomorrow. Sorry.'

'You don't need to apologize to me,' Tom says. 'Are you ready to sleep then?'

I nod and wait for him to reach across me to turn out the light. I lie motionless as his breathing slows into snores, still in the dress I had hopefully picked out for our last night in paradise. I try to stay awake to listen to the sounds of the island one more time, but all I can hear is the noise of a distant motorcycle revving and some drunken girls singing songs about love. I fall asleep imagining the sound of the sea instead.

THEN

'WE'RE HERE.'

I open my eyes to see Caroline grinning down at me. She reaches out a hand to tug me up from the floor of the boat. I've been lying there for the last hour, the wooden deck slightly damp against my back, but anything was better than sitting up whilst the sea rocked violently around us.

'Get up and see paradise!'

Caroline has barely pulled me to my feet before she's dashed away, hoisting her backpack on and fighting to be the first to disembark. I take a moment to steady myself, resting my hands on my thighs and silently pleading the world to stop swaying just long enough for me to stagger ashore.

When I finally straighten, slowly and with a deep inhale for good measure, I see the truth in Caroline's words. We got the last boat over and the sun is low in the sky, casting shades of amber and aureolin across the bay. The island stretches out before us, a cluster of white-painted buildings vying for space along the coast and a sprawl of ragged hills rising up behind them. The village is glittering and pale, glowing in the burnished shades of sunset. It really is paradise.

I take a deep breath and the air is clean and fragrant, the

smell of the sea sharpened by the salty scent of fish frying somewhere. My stomach emits a small shudder and I'm relieved to find that seasickness hasn't stopped me from being hungry. I would eat my way across Greece if I could.

'Not got your sea legs yet?'

From one of the long benches that line the boat's edge a girl throws a sympathetic smile, adjusting the straps of her own bag. I hadn't noticed her before – the boat was crammed with backpackers, with barely enough space to sit. She looks effortlessly cool, long brown hair spilling down her back and occasionally woven into elaborate braids decorated with brightly coloured threads. She wears a tie-dye crop top and harem pants printed with parades of white elephants. One ear is lined with an entire row of delicate golden hoops that snake from lobe to helix. It's a look that Caroline tries to emulate, buying floaty smocks from tucked-away marketplaces and wearing tiny studs in her nose. She never quite seems to pull it off. But then, four weeks into travelling I still look like I'm going for a picnic in the park, in my white floaty vest top and denim shorts. I'm hardly one to talk.

'Not quite,' I say, straightening up.

'Well, you're here now.'

'Yes.' I take a deep breath. 'I'm here now.'

Caroline is already talking animatedly to a trio of girls on the dock, waving her arms as she points towards me. I trudge down the gangplank to meet her, my legs still braced against the unsteady rhythm of the waves.

'There are only a couple of hostels on the island,' Caroline calls out to me. 'This lot are going to show us the way. Come on!'

It was Caroline's idea to go travelling the summer before our A-Levels. I'd been less sure, my parents frowning and saying that I should wait until next year.

'You're not even eighteen yet!' my mum had harrumphed in our home counties kitchen. 'What are you going to do out there, exactly?'

What we were going to do didn't seem to matter at the time. All that seemed important was the possibility of being far away, somewhere the sun would bleach my hair and the mundanities of life back home would be easily forgotten. I was bored of days portioned out by sixth-form bells and long, cold corridors. I was entranced by the pictures that Caroline pointed at in a well-worn travel magazine as we stretched out on her bed after school, our skirts hitched up over our thick, regulation tights. As a grey sheen of rain ran down her bedroom window, we looked at pictures of sun-soaked shores and whitewashed buildings glinting with heat. I could almost feel the warmth radiating from the glossy pages. We frayed them with our touch and turned their corners over with excitement, a promise of summer hidden behind the name of every town. I imagined holiday romances with young men with long, tangled hair, and nights spent dancing under the stars. The extent of my travel experience was the one package holiday my parents insisted on every year, but that did little to deter me. I had savings stored up from a year working at a DVD rental shop that I'd been carefully putting away to buy a car. We booked a plane ticket the next day.

'Island hopping!' Caroline had declared, thrusting a brochure into my suspicious-looking mum's hand. 'Seven weeks. We'll be back by mid-August. Completely safe, and anyway, the flight's only a couple of hours. You've got nothing to worry about.'

Ever since then, Caroline had led the meandering path that we had drawn across the Greek archipelago. She's always been better with people than me, blonde and preppy and effortlessly likeable. She would corner new friends in dorm rooms with

her teeth clenched into a grin and scribble down the names of mythical-sounding places, nodding absordedly.

'That sounds *exactly* like what we're after,' she'd pronounce happily. 'So how do you get there again?'

This place had been my idea though. We were over halfway through our planned trip and party resorts crammed with backpackers were starting to wear thin. Whilst Caroline slid into new friendship groups easily, energized by the never-ending rotation of people, I found myself nervous and tired. The constant circus of smiling and trying desperately not to overthink my every word, of painfully navigating in-jokes whilst Caroline laughed along, was exhausting to me. As we pored over brochures, I had imagined myself sun-kissed and glowing. I had envisaged some part of myself slipping away with the cold English weather. A whole new person rising with the temperature. I hadn't counted on still being just as shy and awkward out here, the shadow behind Caroline's blazing sun.

'Let's go somewhere properly remote and lie on a beach for a week,' I had pleaded.

Caroline had nodded and shuffled her notes. As much as she tried to give the impression that she simply floated between places, turning up wherever a good recommendation carried her, she was a prolific planner.

'OK, there's this one place that sounds great. Teensy. Only one town and then loads of beautiful beaches. It's a bit of a nightmare to get to, but I'm up for it, if you are.'

We had sketched out a winding route, catching buses and boats that grew increasingly smaller and more sparsely filled. Now, newly arrived, we are guided to our hostel by our new friends. We calculate that a private room works out almost as cheap as two beds in a dorm, and congratulate ourselves gleefully on our luck. When we push open the door, we see why – the room is basic, with thin sheets and a cracked mirror hanging

askew on the wall. In the bathroom, a wisp of black mould coils out from between tiles and a still-sodden bathmat wilts on a rusted radiator. A window looks out on to next door's air vent and the twin beds sag in the middle when we sit on them. In a half-hearted tribute to our destination someone has hung a print of Santorini above one of the narrow beds, the shades of blue too bright and the whites of the buildings greying.

'Imagine making Santorini look ugly,' Caroline muses, as though she is an expert on the place, not someone who'd taken a single day trip to its whitewashed streets two weeks ago. 'Anyway. Shall we go out and get some food? I'm starving.'

We find a tiny taverna right on the beach and order souvlaki and beers. Caroline slurps hers down before the food arrives and orders another. She stretches her arms above her head and grins, her face radiant in the early evening light.

'This place! Great idea, Rach.'

I sip my beer and bite into an olive. It tastes salty and slick in my mouth, its oily juices so sharp I almost wince.

'Wait, is that . . .' Caroline squints at something behind me. 'It is! Hey! Over here.'

She stands up, waving her arms above her head.

'The girls from the boat I met earlier,' she explains, beaming as she collapses back into her chair. 'We can probably squeeze them in, can't we, if we just pull that table there over . . .'

Three girls pile into the taverna, grinning and hugging Caroline as though they've known each other all their lives. It's one of the things I've found interesting about travelling. Intimacies seem to arise from the smallest encounters: a single night out, a shared dorm room. Strangers become your best friends for a few days, an attachment that feels intense and electric, and then you never speak to them again. Or at least they become Caroline's best friend. I've always made friends slowly, careful of any assumed confidence and wary of sharing

secrets. Even my friendship with Caroline was birthed from our mothers' closeness, formed at a prenatal class and followed up with playdates and cups of tea at our kitchen table whilst their husbands worked.

'We've literally known each other our whole lives,' Caroline will often tell people, for once not being overly liberal with her use of the word.

I smile and say hi, and they exclaim that that was me, the girl on the boat who lay on the floor the entire time. I nod and laugh and help them to drag chairs over.

As I move my beer aside to make space on the table, Caroline is already reeling off the places we've been to so far, counting them off on her fingers.

'And then Zakynthos, which was great. So much fun,' she babbles. 'So, after here, who knows!'

A waiter places laminated menus on the table as our new friends murmur appreciatively about how cheap it is in Zakynthos, how great the sunsets are.

'Wait!' one exclaims. 'We haven't introduced ourselves properly. I'm Helena.'

I find myself shaking hands with Helena, Kiera and Priya in an elaborate imitation of adult rituals. None of us are old enough to have ever really needed to shake anyone's hand or enact any kind of formality before. Yet out here, ordering beers and forgetting to call our parents, we all feel endlessly grown-up.

'So where are you off to next?' Caroline takes a sip of her beer.

'We're actually staying here for a bit. Working. Saving up some money for the next few months,' says Priya.

She seems to be constantly playing with her hair. It's entrancingly dark and glossy, and she toys with long strands as though she knows exactly how mesmerizing it looks. She twirls it around one finger, tosses it back over her shoulder,

shakes her head so that it tumbles down the length of her spine.

'Here?' Caroline raises one eyebrow. 'Doesn't seem like there'd be that many places looking.'

'We've already got something lined up.' Kiera places her menu down on the table. 'Girl we met back in Athens sorted it. She'd just left and said they were always looking.'

It's the first time she's spoken. Of the three of them Helena seems to dominate the conversation. Her body claims the same kind of command, tall and willowy, her eyes an unnerving grey that makes it hard to look away. In contrast, Kiera is slight and delicate, almost bird-like in her proportions and the distracted way she plays with the corner of a menu. Her hair is a golden-brown shade that reminds me of honey, of sand, of the early evening light. It's cut bluntly above her shoulder blades so that it brushes along a smattering of freckles that rise up her neck. They embellish her collar bone and her jawline, almost as if the sun has claimed her skin as its own.

'Bar work,' chips in Priya. 'Easy money. Then we're going a bit further afield. Are we ready to order?'

Caroline neatly skirts around how long we've got left on our trip. Most of the other backpackers we've met have already finished sixth form and are stretching their wings beyond the few weeks we have remaining. Whilst we're revising oxbow lakes and *King Lear* they'll still be exploring the real world, and I can already sense Caroline prickling with envy.

We stay at the restaurant until the sun has slid beneath the horizon, casting the world with shades of pink, and then orange, and then finally a deep and bloody red. Night tiptoes into the edges of the sky and the air cools slightly against our skin. I've never quite got used to the lingering warmth of the nights out here, the promise of being able to stay out late that it brings, the way you can look up and see the stars without

needing to plead for a jacket. The heat sings of possibility, and I can feel it creeping around the cracks in our inhibitions as we down the dregs of our drinks. The empty beer bottles tinge the evening with a kind of honeyed glow, the lights strung up around the taverna's terrace becoming faintly magical. Being drunk is an almost entirely new experience for me. Back home I'd only experienced the occasional Smirnoff Ice, smuggled from Caroline's mum's cupboard and drunk furtively in a park or bedroom. My parents would only ever let me have one glass of wine with special dinners, and even then I would glug it back resolutely, keen to show them I was mature enough to enjoy it. The revelation that nobody out here seems to bother with IDs was unexpected, an entire world of adult delights opening up a year early.

'We're going to check this place out where we're working,' Helena says eventually. 'Wanna come?'

I can see Caroline's eyes starting to glitter already, her speech becoming more rapid and high-pitched. She grins.

'Definitely! You're up for it as well, right, Rach?'

I nod and mimic her falsetto enthusiasm.

'Definitely! Let's go.'

The bar is tucked away on a side street just back from the main strip. You can hear it before you see it; a babble of laughter, the pulse of a bassline trembling down the cobbled road. The boundary between where the party starts and the street ends is blurred by crowds that spill out on to the pavement, smoking and brandishing plastic pint glasses. Women who look like they've just rolled in off the beach perch on the edge of a terrace, and couples writhe in time to a trance-like beat. We've arrived late enough that tables have already been pushed to the sides of the single room, a makeshift dancefloor forming in the space they leave behind. A crowd jostles for space at a

long bar staffed by girls a similar age to us. They're all dressed in shorts and slim-fitting t-shirts that show off the hard, flat lines of their stomachs. They weave around each other as they scurry to pour drinks, to take handfuls of change, to replace bottles on shelves lined with spirits, their order undefined and haphazard. I'm immediately fascinated by them, their tanned skin and ease of movement as they navigate the small space. It is almost as though they are performing an elaborate dance, a ritual of motion as their bodies slip around each other in perfect synchrony.

'This looks great!' Caroline exclaims. 'I had no idea there'd be clubs here.'

'It's not exactly a club,' says Helena. 'It's a bar, really. But it's so popular, and if people want to dance . . .' She spreads her hands wide in a gesture of what-can-you-do. 'Come on then. Let's get a drink.'

Caroline clutches my hand as we slip through the thickening crowds. We stake out a spot at the bar and Helena suggests getting tequilas, shouting out the word like a battle cry. I nod, even though shots still make me feel sick, and count out coins. Travelling has been much more expensive than I anticipated, and I experience a sharp jolt of worry when I realize there are no notes left in my purse. I had carefully calculated my budget for the week, promising myself I'd be careful with it this time.

'Cheers!' exclaims Caroline, holding her shot aloft.

We all whoop and clink our glasses. I throw my drink back and wait for the heat to extend outwards, to blur my brain and to expand into the tips of my toes. I see Kiera wince, holding her hand to her mouth as if she isn't used to taking shots.

'Let's dance!' Priya says. She's glassy-eyed, wiping the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand.

The dancefloor is hot and sticky, and I stumble as I try to keep up with the other girls' moves. They sway seductively,

their arms extended and their hips moving in time to the music. I usually feel awkward dancing, but the tequila is doing its work and I stretch my arms skyward and close my eyes. When I open them, Caroline is laughing, reaching out to clutch my hands and pulling me close so that our bodies are entwined and our pelvises press into each other. She's caught someone's eye and is doing her best to impress them – I can feel her glancing over my shoulder, grinding close to me as she makes sure they're watching. She's always commanded the attention of boys, flirting in the hallways after school and pouting with gloss-slicked lips. She balances her body in front of men like a prize whilst I wish somebody would look at me the way they do her, that hungry and carnivorous gaze that promises you are worthy of desire.

I've never quite managed to mimic her confidence, her assumption that she will be wanted. More often than not my own body feels like a thing I haven't quite grown into yet, a new outfit I still need to expand to fill. I don't look round to see who she's got her eyes fixed on. I just wrap my arms around her and try to keep up, the beat quickening and my movements out of time.

'I'm going to sit down for a minute,' I shout into Caroline's ear, my voice hoarse as it competes with the pulse of the music.

She nods, smiling, and I'm not sure if she's heard me. I pull away from her anyway. I head back to the bar and wait until I can squeeze on to one of the stools lined up against it. I ask for a water, my mouth dry. The server fills a tall glass with ice and I vaguely remember my mother warning me not to drink the water abroad, promising me bouts of food poisoning. I throw it back anyway, the ice clinking against my teeth. The air is so warm that I can immediately see the solid cubes start to disintegrate and slip into small slivers. I take one in my mouth and feel it slide into nothing against the damp heat of my tongue.

‘Vodka?’

I hurry to swallow, press the heel of my hand into my lips to wipe them. They are already dry beneath my touch.

‘Water. It’s so hot in here.’

‘Let me get you something stronger.’

I survey the man leaning up against the bar beside me. He’s much older, maybe in his early thirties. I note that his jaw is shaded with stubble, faint and wiry as though he shaved this morning. The boys at school hardly have tentative lines of upper-lip fluff, a shaving rash from skin that barely needs to see a razor. He has a slight East London accent, and his shirt-sleeves are rolled up. In spite of the scent of sweat that is beginning to permeate the room, his clothes look crisp and fresh. I feel a dull tug of disbelief that this man – grown-up and attractive – is offering to buy me a drink. Telling me that he will buy me a drink. As he leans closer to me, I smell the tang of aftershave on his skin and feel an unexpected pull of lust.

‘Thanks,’ I say.

He flags down one of the girls and she comes straight over. As he asks for two vodka and Cokes her gaze slides across and she seems to weigh me up, her eyes narrowing. I look down at my glass.

‘What’s your name?’ he asks, bringing his mouth close to my ear, even though it isn’t so loud over here, away from all the speakers.

‘Rachel,’ I say. ‘My name’s Rachel.’

And I know before I even ask his that I will never forget it.

NOW

I ALWAYS WAKE before Tom. I prefer it that way. Even at the beginning, almost a decade ago when everything was new and exciting, I treasured that tiny sliver of the day alone. I would wake without an alarm and try to slide out of bed without disturbing him. I'd make a cup of coffee and go and sit in the living room, or out on the balcony of our first tiny flat if it was warm enough. Even in summer the sky would still be dark and I would watch it mottle into light, flecks of blue and white and yellow spreading upwards and outwards, until they cast the horizon in a bright and hopeful glow. I would feel like I was the only person alive, even as the world around me started to stir, the distant growl of traffic beginning to clog the arteries of the city and sirens left over from the night wailing sluggishly in the distance. I'd let my coffee go cold and throw the dregs down the sink. Then I'd climb back into bed and coil my body into Tom's, feeling him judder into consciousness and letting him sleepily kiss my neck. I'd feel a small and secretive pleasure that before his day had even begun, I'd had my favourite part of mine.

But on the last day of our holiday Tom wakes me, humming tunelessly from the bathroom. Without air-conditioning the room always seems to get stifling overnight, the smell of our

bodies and the density of our sleep filling the air. Blearily, I roll out from under the sheets and tug open a window. The outside is sharp with heat, smelling faintly of petrol and dust from the road that runs beneath our room. For a moment I stay leaning on the sill, my best summer dress now creased. I wait for a breeze but find that the air is still and heavy, the languorous weight of summer barely stirring against my skin.

'Dressed already?' Tom rounds the door holding armfuls of clothes. He bundles them into a suitcase laid out open on the floor.

'I was wearing this last night,' I say. 'I must have slept in it.'

'Were you?' He shrugs. 'The boat leaves in a couple of hours. I thought we could go for breakfast first?'

There's no hot water and I find myself washing beneath an icy stream, my body recoiling to the edge of the shower stall. I never used to mind things like this. It made me feel like I was living a new and wholly unpredictable kind of life that was a million miles away from my parents' yellow-tiled bathroom with its white fluffy towels and reliable water tank.

As I lather my hands with body wash, I remember my encounter last night. The woman in the bar knew me. She had perhaps thought of me often over the years, in the same way I had thought about her. Slipping around the sides of memories, always in the background of moments that felt soldered on to my soul. She hadn't expected to see me back here. And why would she? That summer was a seismic shift in both of our lives, the kind you turn your back on and try never to speak of again. You can always go home and get a job and get married and forget any of this happened. You can mention the months you spent travelling to anyone who asks in a vague and distant manner. You can joke about finding yourself whilst all the time knowing you lost a part of yourself that you can never get back. You can slip into anonymous lives where