

## ABOVE THE WATERLINE

FRANÇOIS DOMAIN

So, this is how it ends.

A quick chat at the corner of the kitchen table, wedged between the main and dessert, like we were just discussing Aunt Adelaide's cataract surgery.

Only this time, it was my guts getting sliced open.

At least you spared me the old "It's not you, it's me" cliché. That's not your style. You're more the type to say it's always my fault. On principle. If you could, you'd probably pin Aunt Adelaide's cataracts on me, too.

We made it past seven years—everyone told us that was the tough one.

We made it past ten—everyone told us *that* was the tough one.

We made it past fifteen, and by then, no one said anything because they'd all been divorced for years.

We almost made it to twenty. Funny thing is, we still might. Divorce doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. Can you imagine? Us signing the papers on our twentieth anniversary. "Happy anniversary, Mathilda. So, which table are you keeping—the living room one or the dining set?"

I had a good run, didn't I? All those efforts to keep my head low, tighten my belt—hell, it shows I've got willpower, like I needed any more proof. But what's the point, when you've been living *my* midlife crisis behind my back, pedal to the metal? Straight

into a concrete pillar on Storrow Drive. And I'm stuck in the passenger seat, watching it all go down.

So I sat there, fists clenched under the table, listening to you say it was "for the best," that we "had good times," but somehow "lost each other along the way"—and you didn't even have the decency to look me in the eye. All I could think was how stupid I was for not driving that intern from accounting all the way home.

The clock on the wall coughs up seconds, one by one. Too loud, but not loud enough to drown out your words.

— You're not saying anything...

What do you expect me to say, Mathilda? What do you *possibly* expect me to say? That we can fix this? That we just need to try harder, see a therapist, or

take up couples' yoga? I know you too well. Once you've made up your mind—even on the dumbest of ideas—there's no turning back. You used to go on sex strikes to get your way. Lately, you've just resorted to monosyllabic answers and long silences. How long has it been since we last touched each other? Five months? Six?

I used to keep track, back in winter.

Sure, not everything revolves around sex, but when it stops altogether—what's left?

And I can't even blame you, not really. It's partly my fault. No—it's entirely my fault. After years of being the one to initiate, I got tired of begging for your attention. Once a week, every Sunday, like some pathetic ritual. So, I decided to strike back. Not because I didn't want you—God, I wanted you—but

because I wanted *you* to want me. I thought I'd give you time, let the desire build up.

And then, of course, Netflix became more engaging than I ever could. "Take your time," I'd say. "Finish your show." And you took it literally. If I went to bed early, you'd slip in later. And later. Until I eventually just turned off the light. I gave up in my own way, too. Stopped being hurt when I woke up alone. Stopped caring when breakfast was just silence and coffee.

So, I'll take the blame. There's no sense keeping score now.

## — Are you okay, Edward?

I gripped the edge of the table like a lifeline, swallowing down words I'd never say. Since when

did I become *Edward* to you? I've been *Eddie* since the day we met. I tried to remember when that changed. Like everything else, I guess it just slipped away.

— I'm fine. I... I'm fine.

I barely recognized my own voice. Maybe it was Edward's voice. Not Eddie's.

You were already halfway down a list of practicalities I hadn't even thought about—the joint account, who'd keep the cat (you hate the cat anyway), moving into Arnold's room until we sorted out what to do with the house.

— Wait... What?

You stiffened, pinching your lips.

— Yes, Edward. We'll have to talk about the house. You know how involved I am in the

community. You're always holed up in your office—what difference does it make to you if you're here or somewhere else?

I almost laughed. "Involved in the community."
Unreal. If throwing Tupperware parties twice a
month qualifies as community service, I should be
glad you never took on climate change or world
peace.

Looking back, I want to believe you were just clinging to logistics to keep from falling apart emotionally. If so, you were doing a damn good job of it, way better than me.

You wanted the car. For the kids. The eldest already has one, and the youngest—he's eighteen now, when did that happen?—is across the country, living it up. What does he care about the car? You

wanted everything and nothing at once. Played your cards like a master magician, flipping hearts into spades so fast I couldn't keep up. All I could do was sit there, breathless, groping for answers to questions I hadn't even grasped.

Under the table, my left leg started bouncing.

First softly, then harder. It's my pressure valve.

Always has been. I tried to hold it down with my elbow, but it was no use. After two decades, you should've known that. You could've let me change into my running gear. Running's the only thing that calms me down. You know that. But in Mathilda's world, there's only Mathilda.

 You should see someone, you said. I mean, physically. Emotionally. Like ordering a pizza. With any luck, DoorDash would drop off the love of my life at my door, still warm.

— I'm not there yet, Mathilda.

You didn't reply.

Of course, we should cancel dinner at Mike and Mary-Ann's. I couldn't bear another night pretending everything was fine. Or worse, having Mary-Ann play therapist because she read something in *Good Housekeeping*.

Cynical? No, I'm not cynical. I'm just about to implode. My leg's doing a tap dance under the table, and my nails are carving trenches into my thighs.

What do you say, Mathilda? Should we take a break?

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— Speak, Edward. Say something.

Believe me, it's better if I don't. Because what I've got on the tip of my tongue is everything you never wanted to hear. Not today, not ever. But especially not today.

You gave me that condescending glare of yours. You should've been a teacher—the kind kids hate.

— I'm going for a run.

You mumbled something, but I didn't bother asking what. I went upstairs to change, almost calm, almost peaceful.

It's hot today.

There's a breeze, but it's hot.

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— Hm. Must be the old *Continental*, right?

The taxi driver hands me back the piece of paper where I scribbled down the hotel's details.

- No idea, man, it's my first time in Rhodes.
- And you are here alone?
- Yep, flying solo!

A wink, a smile. He chucks my suitcase into the trunk without a second thought while I slide into the backseat.

- Can we take the coastal route?
- We can... but at night, you won't see much.

He probably doesn't get why seeing the sea right away is so important to me. For him, it's just the usual backdrop—waves, salt on his lips, moonlight glinting on the water. But when you've just gotten off a plane, spent four hours cramped up eating tiny bags of pretzels, and finally escaped the Boston suburbs, the sight of the sea makes your chest open up—and your ego shrink.

My left leg starts to jiggle. This time, it's not nerves—it's excitement. New horizons, new terrain—literally miles and miles away from the shit I left behind.

I've played out these holidays in Greece dozens of times in my head, different variations on the same theme. The first version? You and I arriving as lovers, gazing into each other's eyes like a couple straight out of a cheesy rom-com. Ten days of bliss by the sea,

sipping overpriced cocktails, whispering sweet nothings as we pretend the world doesn't exist.

Yeah, that version's been dead for a while.

After your meltdown, I imagined a new scenario—where I slink out of the airport looking like I just got dumped, and the whole world gives me that 'poor guy' look.

But of course, nobody gives a damn that my heart's in pieces, so here I am instead, in the back of a taxi speeding down some foreign highway, having a chat with Ionas, the driver, who's ranting about tourists coming to the island just to work remotely.

— Is good for them, but for us? Huh? Not so good. They rent Airbnbs, stay a few months, then they leave. Just like that. Never go out. No café, no taverna, no nothing! They think if they say 'efcharisto'

once, they speak Greek. Go to the beach, make a salad in kitchen, then...  $\alpha v \tau io$ , bye-bye, gone. They don't learn anything, can't say what they eat for lunch, right? What did you eat for lunch, huh?

- Uh, beef with veg—
- No, in Greek! Say in Greek!

I come up empty, and he waves me off with a dramatic sigh.

— See what I mean?

Ionas has an opinion on everything—fishing quotas, the height of the new hotels in the marina, the situation in the Balkans, Brexit, Eurovision... The only thing he doesn't seem to have an opinion on is his driving style.

Outside the window, a jumbled slideshow of landscapes flickered by: a small village, a cluster of hotels, a stretch of beach, a gas station. Neon signs from bars whose names I forgot the moment I tried to remember them, and a pale moon struggling to compete with the bright glow of all the five-star resorts we passed, where I half-expected Ionas to slam on the brakes at any moment.

You can't deny it—you've always had a taste for luxury. When you booked a hotel, it had to have two thousand rooms, five tennis courts you'd never use, Zumba classes three times a day—none of which you'd attend—and at least four pools where you'd avoid getting your hair wet.

— It'll be quiet for sure, where you're staying, says Ionas.

I nod, not sure why.

- You should've rented a car, though.
- Yeah, yeah, it's all planned.

He zigzags through traffic, cuts off scooters which return the favor, barely stops for red lights, and finally winds his way into a dusty alley. For a second, I wonder if this is some tourist trap, and I'm gonna end up stranded.

— Here you go. That'll be twenty-six euros.

I glance out the window, trying not to laugh. In front of me stands a small white facade, with construction barriers up, fresh cement sectioned off by red and white tape instead of a proper threshold, and a stray wire dangling from a half-dead sign that reads *Elli Inn*.

— Must be some mistake, Ionas. This can't be...

He's already out of the car before I finish my sentence.

I open Google Maps, which conspires with Ionas to make me believe in his bad joke.

Fuck.

Ionas leaves me there, suitcase in hand, in front of a door covered in plastic film. I feel as comfortable as a kid on their first day of school.

Three percent battery left. I've got three damn percent left on my phone. No way that's enough to find another hotel tonight, or with my luck, the battery will die halfway through the checkout.

Summoning some courage, I maneuver around the red and white tape marking off the fresh concrete slab and push the not-so-automatic door.

The lobby—gigantic but strangely devoid of furniture, except for a pile of floor lamps still wrapped in plastic—is nothing like what you've gotten me used to. No bling-bling, no leather sofas inviting you to sink in, no little kiosks for car rentals or booking excursions, no welcome drinks. There's a marble floor, sure, and a counter where four receptionists could easily fit. But it's a bit lacking for a five-star hotel.

I slap my passport down on the counter.

- Edward Dresner. I have a reservation.
- Good evening, Sir. Welcome to the Elli Inn.Ten nights for two people, is that correct?

His gaze wanders around the lobby, searching for any sign of a companion.

— My wife will arrive a bit later. She's... been delayed.

He shrugs, uninterested, and refocuses all his attention on his computer screen. A few minutes and a stack of documents later, he pushes two white cards my way.

- You're in room 304. My colleague will show you to your room.
  - It's okay, thanks.
  - Give me a minute, I'll call someone for you.
- Really, I can find my way to the third floor, no need to bother anyone.

But the little rascal has already pressed the button, and on the other side of the hall, a hidden door flies open. A tall, lanky guy emerges, rushes towards me, grabs the suitcase from my hands, and motions for me to follow him quickly.

We squeeze into the world's smallest elevator.

The bellhop presents me with an uninviting view of his sweat-drenched back—thanks, but no thanks—then presses the number 5 on a control panel that looks like a two-year-old has redesigned it with every crayon in their pencil case.

- I'm in room 304. We need to go to the third floor, not the fifth.
  - Yes, yes. You have to press 5 to get to 3.

I try to look at him, to see if he's making fun of me, but his soaked back remains completely serious. — It's because of the renovations, we're almost finished.

It doesn't seem that way when the doors open onto a landing covered from floor to ceiling in protective tarps.

— They should be applying the last coat of paint this weekend!

He lets my suitcase wheels get tangled in the tarps and struggles with them all the way down the hallway. I'm already at the door, marked with a sticker bearing the number 304 written in blue marker, while he's still fighting his way through the obstacle course.

The room isn't much, but after navigating through scaffolding to get here, it feels like an oasis straight out of 1930s Berlin. Small and a bit plain, but

at least the air conditioner is softly humming, the bed's sheets look inviting, and the pool view (yes, the pool—a small, anemic blue bean where two strokes would cover the whole length) coaxes me to forgive the mess outside. After all, you know when renovations start, never when they'll finish—we learned that well enough with your new kitchen.

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The (beep beep beep) of the alarm doesn't wake me up. I hear it—a grating, persistent (beep beep beep) ring, but I can't quite place it. It's been months since I've heard this electronic (beep beep beep) cacophony: I'm usually the type to jump out of bed before the sun even thinks about rising, making my coffee before the morning wakes up. But last night, I went to bed really late. The jet lag had very little to do with it; I just didn't want to go to sleep right after getting there, so I wandered aimlessly—opening cupboards, rearranging my sparse wardrobe, pacing to the balcony door and back, scrolling through pointless videos on my phone. I was almost giddy that no one

was there to tell me not to lie on the bed with wet hair or give me a disapproving look because I'd used the wrong towel to dry my toes.

I finally manage to shake myself awake. My brain takes a full two minutes to start up again; then, without further ado, I yank open the thick curtain covering the bay window, and a cascade of warm light crashes against my bare skin. My neurons stand at full attention, and... well, let's just say they aren't the only ones.

Shorts, sneakers, t-shirt, and I'm on the move.

The door slams behind me, probably waking up half the floor. I feel a little guilty—briefly—before reminding myself it's payback for all the doors that slam at 3 AM without anyone feeling apologetic. The

elevator heaves itself up from the ground floor with the sound of an off-balance washing machine, and the rest of the hotel must turn over in their beds, cursing the fool who's up at such an ungodly hour.

If you have to press 5 to get to the third floor, who knows what button needs pressing to reach the ground floor? Feeling adventurous, I press 0, and the wardrobe doors leading to Narnia close around me with a high-pitched squeak that promises the worst. Against all odds, I'm ejected into the lobby, where the cool air makes every hair on my body stand on end.

## — Kalimera!

Behind the reception desk, the night watcher has been replaced by a curvaceous brunette who greets me with a broad smile, and I am grateful when she switches to English.

— Good morning! You're up early! Busy day ahead?

Her accent makes me want to linger, like a swirl of honey in hot tea.

It isn't just her charm that makes me launch into an endless rundown of my plans; I'd do it anyway.

You know me—ask a question, and I respond. Maybe a bit too exhaustively. Her eyebrows start to twitch in a kind of Morse code, but I don't slow down my rambling—It's not like what I'm saying really matters.

— Are you sure you're only staying for a week? It sounds like you've planned a whole summer! Most of our guests are content to lounge by the pool until it's time to get back on the plane.

I don't know if that hint of disdain is in her voice or just in my ear.

She finally wishes me good luck with my run and adds,

— Be careful with the cement on your way out!

Three guests almost left their footprints. At this rate,
it'll turn into the Hollywood Walk of Fame!

I push the automatic door with an overly loud laugh, and the heat already surrounding the hotel crashes down on me. With my earbuds securely in place, I take a deep breath and mentally prepare myself to hate the first five miles, as always, until my body warms up, my brain switches off, and the endorphins kick in. Craig is always surprised that, for years, I've stuck to the same route, every day without exception. It's the only way to avoid overthinking and getting distracted.

Once I'm in the zone, I don't want to break out of it. It's like music—though I stopped running with drum'n'bass pounding in my ears a while ago. Sure, it keeps you pumped, but the beat has a way of drowning out thoughts that only come up when your heels fall into a steady rhythm on the asphalt. The ones that surface when silence becomes the loudest noise. So, I follow the same paths, take the same turns, dodge the same potholes, and run along the same Charles River to arrive at the same water tower. The few times I manage to drag Craig along, he always uses the water tower as an excuse to take a break. I think it's more psychological than anything else, and as a result, I'm tempted to pause too, even when I'm alone.

I always tell him it's the wrong place to stop because after that, it's downhill. Not for long, but enough for me to extend my stride, let my body get used to it, and enjoy feeling fit for my age.

That's where you used to take off like a rocket. Back when we were still running together.

It's been years since you stopped coming. Years since you've run at all. You say it's because of him, that he took your place, but it's the other way around: you left a vacant spot, and I asked Craig to fill it.

That's his job as my best friend. And heck, it's not like he runs with me every day—more like once every two months that I manage to drag his rugby player's ass onto my forest trails.

You never liked Craig, anyway. I never understood why.

Craig is like a brother to me. He's the one who organizes my surprise birthday parties (you don't like

birthdays, but I do), the one who calls me in the middle of the night when he gets dumped, the one who forcibly signs me up for all the crazy activities he wants to try, and that I often end up doing alone because he chickens out. Okay, not often—I exaggerate. It's happened twice: bungee jumping and skydiving. Over forty, and you'd think he'd have figured out by now that he doesn't like extreme sports, but no, he insists, and I'm the one who ends up shitting myself on top of the bridge on his behalf. He's the one I go to see play rugby, and with whom we end up at the bar celebrating the victory, the defeat, a flag that fell in the left corner during the second half, a rabbit that ran across the field. Do you remember the one time I tried rugby to make him happy? I stumbled out of the scrum in pieces. Craig is

built for it; I'm built for running. You can't have everything.

Turn right onto Agias Sofias.

There. That's exactly what I dislike. Having to watch where I'm going, having to listen to that robotic voice give me instructions I have no desire to follow. Taking my phone out of my pocket to check the map because I have no idea where Agias Sofias is, and the street signs fell off years ago without anyone thinking it was worth putting them back up.

I turn right, onto Agias Sofias or wherever. I'll find my way. I memorized the route before leaving, and it's not complicated. Almost straight to the beach, up to the statue of Diagoras, then along the sea to the old town, around what looks like a sandcastle built to the scale of a real castle, along the walls, and right

before the port. Hard to get lost when all you have to do is follow the edge of the world.

Continue straight for five hundred yards.

It's not just the brain that adapts to a routine; everything else does too. My feet search for familiar terrain, for bumps and dips that they would perfectly align with, but find only new ones, poorly placed, poorly formed. It's like waking up amnesiac and having to relearn how to walk, having to exert three times the effort with each step. Adapt. Just as I've adapted to running without you.

You said you would get back to it after Arnold was born.

You said you would get back to it after Louis was born.

You say you're going to get back to it, that you just need to lose three or four pounds, all while grabbing a snack from the pantry.

You say you miss it; I really want to believe you.

From dusty street to dusty street, I navigate as best I can on sidewalks deformed by tree roots, catching fleeting shade from the branches overhead. I zigzag between construction barriers abandoned years earlier, dodging locals giving me dark looks for disrupting their peaceful morning.

It's not just the hotel under reconstruction that makes me think of post-war Berlin; it's all of Rhodes. The shock is all the greater because you've gotten me used to the bright whites and blues of Santorini or Mykonos—not the ochres and browns covering

dilapidated buildings, not the rusty grays of rolleddown shutters on closed shops, not the faded reds of bad graffiti littering the walls of abandoned houses.

I struggle to find my rhythm. The flatness of Rhodes I noticed the night before during my taxi ride was just a façade; as soon as you venture into the intimate folds of the island, it's hills and valleys as far as the eye can see, gradients that are breaking my legs.

At the roundabout, take the first exit on the right.

A car horn blares at me for no apparent reason; I'm not in the middle of the road, not crossing outside of crosswalks—things I do a bit too often when I'm *in the zone*; when the miles have finally severed the tenuous link that keeps me anchored to reality.

I quicken my pace, despite the heat rising in waves from the asphalt and hitting me full force. My skin is still trying hard to fight it. It will take a few days, but it too will get used to it, it too will adapt, and eventually, the tears of sweat will dry up.

I can't help but wonder what you're doing, now that you've sent me off to the other end of the world. Are you packing your bags? Mine? Are you doing your best to empty the bank account before we play rock-paper-scissors to divide the remains of our crumbling lives? Or did you just find the opportunity too tempting to spend ten days with your lover, screwing in every room of the house while I wallow on my island? Because there must be someone else. As much as it pains me to admit it, there must be someone else. You don't just erase a life like that, in a snap, for no real reason. If that's the case, then go for

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it, get it out of your system and I know you quite

well, Mathilda, you'll get bored of that too. You'll get

bored of him.

And I would forgive you. I won't forget, we won't

forget, but we would start over.

Honk.

This time, I'm in the middle of the road.

I've finally entered *the zone*. A zone where you

and I get back together, where we talk, where we

laugh. A zone that has the taste of cotton candy.

Except...

A side stitch starts to form.

Breathe.

Breathe.

It will pass.

Breathe.

The side stitch invades my belly, my chest, my throat.

Breathe, breathe.

It ties knots in my insides. *Breathe!* I quicken my pace (*breathe*) to leave behind everything which (*breathe*) I'm not prepared for. The uphill seems to (*breathe*) go on forever, and—

And then there's nothing.

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In front of me, just beneath my feet. The road stops here.

Everything else is just blue.

One second, we were ordering drinks, the next, I jolted awake on the living room sofa. No idea how I'd ended up there.

- I didn't hear you come in.
- Huh?
- What time did you get back? I didn't hear you.

My first instinct was to snap back with a "why do you care?" Very constructive. Luckily, the hangover slowed me down, and you had already moved on before I could test that remark on your mood, which was as vibrant as your clothes. You, who had only worn gray and black for what felt like forever, were

now flaunting bright amber and red hues that practically hurt my eyes. So, mourning's over, is it? Years of austerity done, and now it's like post-war jubilation? I had rarely seen such a quick armistice.

— I'm going out tonight.

There were so many undertones in that little sentence that I didn't know where to start.

- Great, I was dreaming of staying home to babysit that bastard cat.
- No reason why you should be the only one making the most of this mess.

My jaw dropped.

— Excuse me?

I listened as your steps clacked all the way to the kitchen. Back and forth. I stayed on the couch, half

groggy, half furious. You know exactly which button to press to make me angry, but there was no way I was falling into the trap this time.

I waited, listening for the familiar hum of the coffee machine—a normal sound on a normal morning—to fade away, and I sighed softly. In a minute, you'd poke your head through the door and ask if I wanted some, and life would go back to normal. This wasn't the first time we'd raised our voices, not the first time we'd said things we'd later regret. Nothing that couldn't be resolved over an espresso.

I didn't want coffee; I didn't want any liquid stronger than Evian, ever again, and yet, I would still say, "Yes, please," just to show some goodwill. The smoke from the peace pipe would have the aroma of strong Arabica, no sugar, no milk.

The cold kitchen tile against my bare feet tried to wake me up as I followed you. You were busying yourself by cleaning the sink. That was your new thing, isn't it? You can't walk through the kitchen without wiping down the stainless steel. But it wasn't the stainless steel that needed attention right now. Anything but the stainless steel.

On the counter, next to your sink that didn't need polishing, there was only one cup in the machine.

— Yes, I'd like one, thank you, I said, as coldly as possible, abandoning the pipe, its peace, and my goodwill in one fell swoop.

Without so much as a pause, as if you had anticipated that exact phrase, as if you had even orchestrated everything to provoke it, you snapped, "You know how to use the machine, I believe."

You didn't even turn to look at me. You kept your face pressed against that stainless steel sink you had wanted so badly and now complained about ten times a day, as if it were my fault that the slightest drop of water landing there left an almost indelible mark. Watching you scrub, scrub, and scrub some more, grumbling all the while, made me want to grab a screwdriver—or better yet, a sledgehammer—and just get rid of that damn sink. Because it wasn't the water droplets you were trying to erase. No, it was so much more than that. And no amount of scrubbing would wipe away the traces of the nearly twenty years that had led to this sink, in this kitchen, in this house. So just spare yourself the effort, Mathilda.

When did it all start? When should I have noticed it—the silences, the instinctive recoils when I got too close, the eye rolls whenever I tried to make

conversation? All those signs that were so obvious now... when had they really begun? Had you ever loved me, Mathilda, or did you just go along with it? Because it was easy, because it was convenient? Have you already packed all your memories in bubble wrap, snugly placed in the middle of boxes full of resentments and bitterness to keep them from breaking?

— Clear something up for me, Mathilda. It was you who made this decision, isn't it? Not the other way around?

You threw down your dishcloth, turned around, and glared at me over your crossed arms, ready to fight back. I pushed a bit harder:

— If one of us should be furious with the other, don't you think it should be me?

- You really don't understand anything.
- You're absolutely right, I don't understand anything. I don't know who put these crazy ideas in your head. Well, actually, I think I know—it's your friend Magaly again, isn't it? What doesn't *Magalywith-a-Y* like, this time, huh?

You kept your lips as tightly sealed as your arms against your chest. We exchanged pauses and silences until my headache took over.

— I'm going to sleep at Craig's tonight, I sighed.It'll do us both some good.

I took a couple of steps up the stairs to get my gym bag, threw in a pair of boxers, a pair of socks, and what was left of my self-respect, when I heard your trembling voice coming from the kitchen.

- Maybe I'm furious because I didn't expect you to adjust to the situation so quickly. Maybe that's why. Seeing you go out, just hours after we made a decision that's going to upend the family, the kids, my parents—and it's not just about going out for a drink to take the edge off of it, no, you're out partying all night. Imagining you in the arms of one of your little sluts who always hang around you... You wasted no time. A bit of ... I don't know, a bit of respect, a bit of restraint wouldn't have been too much to ask! I'm not asking you to mourn, but going out flirting all night isn't quite the reaction I expected right after our decision.
- *Our* decision? Your decision, Mathilda, *your* decision, if you remember correctly. You really think I... And anyway, even if I had spent the night chasing after every woman that crossed my path, since

yesterday, at 1:20 PM, it's my problem, not yours anymore.

— It has always been the problem.

I stopped in the middle of the stairs.

Two realities presented themselves to me. One where I continued up the steps and pretended I didn't hear your comment, the other where I came back down.

I didn't know what happened in the reality where I went up the stairs.

I came to find you in front of the sink, immobile, still with your arms crossed.

— What does that mean, it has always been the problem?

You suddenly remembered you made yourself a coffee. You hurried to your cup as if fearing I'd snatch it from under your nose.

— Do you think I'm blind, Edward? Do you think I haven't seen you all these years, strutting around, showing off whenever there's a pretty girl around? Puffing out your chest like a barnyard rooster and cooing endlessly, spouting all your pathetic clichés to make them laugh and open their legs? Do you think I don't know what you're up to? Do you really take me for a fool? A little respect is all I ask for. Instead, you continue to drag me through the mud, treating me like some trophy wife who stays home making your meals while you chase after any pair of legs that—

Your voice broke.

You turned around, grabbed your cloth, and for a second, I thought you were resuming scrubbing. But it was just your shoulders shaking.

My anger, my resentment vanished. I wanted to take you in my arms, to find my Mathilda again, not the stranger I just had a conversation with out of nowhere, this stranger who made me believe Mathilda wanted us to separate.

Of course not.

Of course, it would all work out. We'd talk it through, take stock, sort things out, and pick up where we hadn't really left off. Just a bump in the road. Not even a flat tire—just a speed bump we'd swerve around at the last second. The relief washed over me, so strong it almost cleared my headache. I placed a hand on the small of your back. You were

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going to turn around, melt into my arms, rest your head on my shoulder, and everything would be over.

You moved away.

I hit the speed bump head-on.

3

Blue. A blue that seizes my breath and holds it captive.

I stand here, poised at the edge of the world, heart beating in time with the rhythm of the waves—coming and going, caressing the shore only to pull away, then returning with greater intensity. I'm caught on a tightrope between yesterday and eternity, suspended in this boundless turquoise until I can no longer tell where I belong—whether it's the world of people or some place beyond.

Trembling, I follow the road for a few steps before finding a narrow, steep path that winds its way down through the thickets to the beach. I slip, lose my footing more than once, scraping my hands on tiny shrubs offering their flimsy support, until I finally reach the sand below. It's too early for the early risers and too late for the night owls; only the wind and the waves keep me company. I breathe in the salty, thick air, heavy with the promise of the coming sun and the weight of forgotten memories.

I take off my shoes and let the sand sift between my toes, brushing against my skin. The first wave creeps forward—timid, testing. I avoid looking at it, afraid I might scare it away. Another, bolder, follows and curls around my ankles. I take a step, it pulls back. I wait, letting it get used to me. Letting its curiosity draw it closer until it brushes against my

feet, lingering at my calves. One step, two steps—its cold fingers on my burning skin, a sharp sting of salt against my wounds.

I kneel, offering myself to her, letting her ebb and flow gently trace my body as she pulls me deeper. She rises to my stomach, making me shiver under her touch, her grip tightening as she wraps around my shoulders and kisses my neck.

And I surrender to her with a sigh.

Silence.

A serene, reassuring silence.

It's in this overwhelming turquoise that I decide to tell you everything—the good, the bad, and everything in between. Everything I've kept buried inside. All my memories: our motorcycle rides, the late-night dinners, our impromptu movie nights,

snogging at the back of the cinema, the carefree laughter, the evenings when we didn't speak, the exhausted returns from long weekends, the arguments about your mother, the arguments about your son, the dreams we left behind on the roadside, the ones we found together. I'd tell you that none of it matters more than having you by my side. I'd tell you that if I'm angry, if I'm disappointed, it's mostly at myself. I'd tell you that—

Cries. Splashes. The world barges into my silent universe, demanding its place.

I lift my head from the water, dazed, disoriented.

The beach has filled with people, the sea overrun

against her will.

Sitting on the sand, amidst the growing chaos, I try to remember the first lines of that letter I'd just

written, but its once beautiful phrases sunk at the bottom of the ocean. Only my anger and bitterness remain on the surface.

I end up going back to running, without needing GPS or Siri to guide me along the endless stretches of sand where bodies are already baking under the blazing sun.

I'll put on sunscreen tomorrow.

Across the still-quiet road, the hotels you'd have picked rise against the sky. Then, just as suddenly, the concrete giants give way to a row of tiny houses, barely larger than garden sheds, where owners pull out chairs to the sidewalk and pick up conversations left unfinished the night before. Their listless eyes track the tourists drifting past, indifferent to it all. An old woman in a bra shouts something at me as I pass

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by her. I wave in response, and she flips me off with a steady hand.

In one hundred yards, keep right.

I turn left.

— Hey, Siri. Stop navigation.

The voice that insists I turn around as soon as possible finally falls silent.

I'll start it back up eventually, once I'm tired of wandering aimlessly from street to street, crossing from one patch of shade to another, stopping at the corner of some deserted garden or under the canopy of a flowering tree.

But not just yet.

4

Italian showers. I've always liked them. Maybe it's the back-to-roots simplicity, the sound of water cascading, or just the feeling of being naked in a space big enough to move without bumping into frosted glass walls. Something about them makes me feel alive. Seen. I wanted to install one at home—just like this one: gray stone walls and floor, a square showerhead suspended from the ceiling, mimicking the weight of rainwater, a clear glass panel that floods the space with natural light. Close my eyes, and I'm in the heart of an equatorial jungle.

You said no. I don't quite remember why—maybe it wasn't practical to clean, or you knew

people who'd slipped and broken their necks in them... I listened to you, and we put in a bathtub instead. Ever since, I'm the one nearly breaking my neck every time I try to take a shower.

Back then, I thought compromises were the keystone of a good marriage. And look at us—compromises on the shower, on the kitchen island, on the car, on the kids' school. We even compromised on TV shows. And yet, here we are, stuck at the same dead end as those couples who never compromised and just did what they wanted without feeling guilty. The joke of the century.

Da, da, da, da-da-da, da-da-da...

Phone.

I know, I'm too old to have the Star Wars theme as a ringtone. In my defense, only Craig has that

privilege; my other contacts get the default ringtone. Yes, even you. And it's not because he's a Star Wars fan. It's just that... well, Craig's a bit hairy. Okay, more than a bit. Vince started calling him Chewbacca, and it annoyed him so much that we all joined in. Out of solidarity, of course. It stuck.

I grab a towel thicker than the carpet in our bedroom and wrap myself in it.

- Hey, Craig!
- I thought you'd never pick up.
- I was in the shower.
- You'll never guess where I am.
- In Moldova?
- Slovakia. No, but you'll never guess where she took me.

- You'll have to tell me fast, Craig. The suspense is killing me.
- Have you heard of Orava? Orava Castle? No kidding, man, it's like the real Sleeping Beauty castle. You know, the one at Disney World? It's got towers and all that crap. And now she's expecting me to be Prince Charming or something. Like, what, I'm supposed to ride horses and wake her up with a kiss every morning? Seriously! My morning breath could kill a horse. When she said we were going to visit a castle, I thought it'd be more of a vampire thing, you know? A little Dracula trip never hurt anyone! Or some ruins—something you can walk around in ten minutes, then call it a day. But no, this is full-on Disney fantasy!

I'm trying to dry myself off with one hand while holding the phone with the other, and I manage to

drop both the phone and the towel at the same time.

He's still ranting about his princess when I pick

everything up again.

— She's in the bathroom now. I suppose the seat is a giant rose petal, and there's a raccoon to fluff the toilet paper for her or something like that.

I burst out laughing.

- I'm telling you, man, I'm overdosed on glitter, pink shit, and unicorns. And unicorns shitting pink glitter. What's next, she'll get me to try on some fucking Prince Charming's spandex, or what?
- I'm sure you can find a pair at the souvenir shop. They'll look great on you.
- Of course they would. Out of the two of us, I have the best ass, everyone knows that.

— I'll take your word for it.

He pauses, and I can practically hear his mind shift gears.

— So, how are you doing?

Sigh. I wanted him to ask, but I don't want to answer.

- It's complicated. Still feels like I'm in the Twilight Zone.
  - Have you heard from her since you got here?
- No. But it's only been, what, twenty-four hours? She took twenty years to decide I'm not the man of her life, she's gonna need a bit more time than that to change her mind. If she ever does.

— Okay. Well, keep me posted. And call if you want to talk, alright? I have to go, Anija's come out of her rose petal. She sends her love, by the way.

Kind, but unnecessary.

- Same here. Thanks for calling.
- I'm here if you need anything, man, okay?

I try my luck once more in the surprise elevator, following the signs indicating the restaurant.

In front of a buffet, I tend to eat three times more than I should. To avoid that, I always force myself to find the smallest plate—usually among the desserts—which I then reasonably fill with greens, and add a piece of chicken or a few fries to not entirely ruin the pleasure of the meal. And a bit of sauce. And I don't

go back for seconds. For breakfast, it's the same. A bowl, some cereals, yogurt, dried fruit, plenty of coffee...

— I thought you got lost...

The tall brunette, to whom I rambled about my life before going for my run, stands in front of me, towel in hand and apron at her hip, offering me a wide smile.

— Lost? Almost, but I found my way back, all good. But now I need to eat something or I will pass out right in front of you. Breakfast is that way, right?

Her smile falters.

- It's almost eleven-thirty...
- Yeah, I was asking for direction, not the time.

I swear, it sounded wittier in my head.

- We serve breakfast until ten-thirty. But the coffee machine stays open all day, if that can tide you over until lunch.
- I've just run a million miles around the island.I was hoping for a bit more than just coffee.
- I'm sorry. They often put out sandwiches on the bar around eleven...

We both turn to the bar just in time to see a kid leaving with arms full of sandwiches, leaving behind a platter emptier than a politician's promise.

- Not your lucky day, it seems.
- You have no idea...
- Lunch will be ready by twelve-thirty.
- Fine. Fine, fine, fine. I'll wait, don't worry. A bit of fasting never hurt anyone, as Jesus says.

- Are you religious?
- Very. I'd believe in anyone who can multiply pain au chocolats at around eleven-thirty when I've missed breakfast.

I manage to get a smile out of her, at least.

— Are you going to enjoy the pool or the beach today?

Maria—that's what her badge says—seems to have as much trouble as I do passing by someone without saying a word.

— Neither. I'm not really the type to spend my vacation basking in the sun. I planned to go to Monolithos Castle this morning. This afternoon, I'm going to the port to organize the two cruises I want to take. Is Symi as great as all the guides say?

She sets down her stack of plates.

— It's been a long time since I went there, but I have very good memories of it. Better than Monolithos. Monolithos is pretty, but it's not exactly..." She shrugs indifferently.

I push away my plate and finish my coffee.

- And what would you recommend instead?
- What do you like?
- The perfect mix for me would be a combination of culture and physical activity. I love museums, but I tend to feel a bit claustrophobic after a while and need to move. Athens was perfect for me, with all the outdoor visits.
  - Lindos should be at the top of your list then."

— Ha! That's your personalized suggestion? The visit all tourists come to Rhodes for? How original!

I give her a wink to let her know I'm joking. It's exhausting how much effort it takes when you just meet someone to give them the cues to understand when you're being humorous.

— After a week here, you'll know more about Rhodes than I do. We don't really have time for sightseeing.

It suddenly hits me that while I'm here to relax—or at least try to—she'll be spending six months confined to this small restaurant. Serving us oversized portions morning, noon, and night, cleaning up after us, prepping before us, looking after us... I'm here to escape, and she's got nowhere to go.

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She picks up her plates, which she's placed on the corner of my table, and disappears into the kitchen.

At the back of the restaurant, a clock gears up to strike noon.

The woman at the reception desk looks as puzzled as I am.

- I assure you, we don't have a rental service onsite. Most guests pick their car at the airport.
- I am aware, thanks. But I triple-checked it before I left, I snap, unlocking my phone.
- Did you book it with your flight, maybe? Some airlines offer—
  - I didn't book it myself—it was... Never mind.

After scrolling through my emails back and forth, I finally find the confirmation.

— Here it is. A Golf, for ten days, at...

I trail off, staring at the screen.

She raises an eyebrow, waiting patiently for me to finish a sentence I have no intention of completing. She gives in before I do.

- Shall I call a cab? To the airport?
- Please.

With my fists jammed into the pockets of my shorts, I head back to the restaurant to get myself another coffee while she tries to reach the taxi company. Maria, who is clearing the table where I just had a quick lunch, pauses when she sees me approaching.

— Are you here for a second serving?" she asks, flashing a smile.

- Just waiting for a taxi. Need to go to the airport.
- The airport? You're going to the airport? Already? She squints slightly, as if I've just announced I'm sailing back to Boston.
- Don't get too excited, it's just a round trip. A slight hiccup, let's say.
- I hope it won't take long. The traffic's bad, at this time of day.
- Don't tell me that—I really don't plan on spending my entire afternoon in a cab.

She gives me a grimace that isn't very reassuring, which makes me turn back toward the reception to check on the situation.

— Your taxi will be here in thirty minutes, the receptionist says with a broad smile.

I nearly drop my coffee cup.

— Thirty minutes? You've gotta be kidding me.

She has that tight-lipped expression that's never a good sign.

— Everyone's headed out to the beach or airport, precisely, all main roads will be jammed. You should have booked a bit earlier. Just give me your number, I'll text you when it's here so you can relax by the pool in the meantime.

She hands me a post-it and a pen, and I scribble my number while grumbling that I have no desire to swim and too much to do to lie around sunbathing.

— You are Mr.? she asks.

— Dresner. Edward. Eddie. Ed.

She stares at me, confused, and gives up on adding anything to the sticky note.

I settle by the pool, finishing off my coffee—just as bitter as my mood. I vaguely notice the couple next to me nudging each other.

— Hey...

I better understand the mindset of these neighbors on lounge chairs who turn their backs to you and go out of their way to avoid conversation.

— Hey, man... Weren't you on the plane yesterday?

No, I swam here.

— Yes. Yeah, right, I recognize you now...

It's mostly the girlfriend I recognize.

- Are you from Boston?
- Suburbs.

I realize I sound too abrupt and think of adding something. But no.

- We live near the harbor, right in the Seaport district.
  - Great.

He extends a hand, still slick with sunscreen.

— I'm Gabriel. And this is my wife, Vanella.

She glances up briefly from her phone, barely visible beneath an enormous hat.

- Girlfriend, she corrects flatly.
- When did you arrive? Sorry, stupid question, we were on the same flight.

I force a smile. Yes, stupid question, can't deny it.

— Well, technically, we arrived today, right, Vanella? We didn't want to rent a car; Vanella's very eco-conscious.

But burning through a couple thousand liters of jet fuel just to sunbathe? Not a problem for good old Vanella.

— So, we took the bus. Well, the *organized* transfer. It's always a bit tedious, you know, doing the rounds of all the hotels in the area, and you always feel like you're the last one to be dropped off, no matter what. But yesterday... Oh, boy. Dude, we waited forever at the bus stop, everyone losing their shit and a driver who only spoke English when he felt like it, you know? The kind of guy who...

I glance at my phone, praying it will ring.

Anything for an excuse to get away. When you tell me I talk too much...

— ... and then this old lady shows up, poor thing, in a wheelchair. We all felt sorry for her— must've been a hundred and ten, forehead wrapped up like she's about to run a marathon. Right, Vanella? I'm not making it up, am I?

A vague movement of the girlfriend's hat.

— And then she starts yelling at my husband, *Get* me a vodka, you fucker, I'm thirsty! Can you believe that? We waited a million years for a little old lady who got plastered on the plane and splits her forehead open because she can't take another step forward? But that's not all, once they managed to get her on the bus, she—

— Gaby, that's enough, you can cut the story short. We don't need all the details...

Completely agree, Vanella-the-eco-conscious, completely agree. I raise my phone to pretend that I urgently need to take a non-existent call.

- She totally shat herself right there on the bus!
  Can you believe it?
  - Gaby!
  - Oh, come on, honey, it's funny...

Not really, no.

- I really have to go. My taxi's probably waiting.
- Or at least I hope so.
- You'll have to tell us about the flight attendant, by the way. We placed bets; I said it was in the bag.

Vanella was less convinced, right, darling? You didn't think she would fall for his little game, did you?

That throws me for a loop. Did you brief him too on your little paranoia that I try to flirt with everyone? I can't even remember what the flight attendant looked like. I was polite to her but it's what we do—be nice to people who have to deal with grumpy passengers on a four-hour flight, right?

The receptionist lowers her eyes when she sees me arrive. No need to ask if she has any news.

Back to the coffee machine. There's nothing better to pass the time than watching coffee you don't want endlessly drip.

The machine purrs as soon as I press the button, and my cup fills up with a muddy liquid that doesn't look like coffee at all.

— Fuuuuuck!
A multitude of wide-open eyes turn toward me.
— Everything okay, Mr. Ed?
— No, Maria. Nothing's okay. Not even close.
— Is there something I can do? she asks, holding
back a concerned look.
I set down my cup of muddy water.
— Do you have a car?
— No, only a scooter.
— Two helmets?
— Maybe one in lost and found. Why?
<ul> <li>Because you're taking me to the airport.</li> </ul>

It's not just Ionas—seems like every Greek drives like they've got their own rulebook. Overtaking on the right, the left, even straight through the middle. Priorities? Optional. Sure, there are stop signs, but they're more like polite suggestions than actual rules. They'll respect them—occasionally—if they're in the mood.

Speeding through the streets of Rhodes on a scooter driven by Maria feels like being thrown into a live-action *Mario Kart* game, half-expecting to dodge banana peels and magic mushrooms at every turn.

She insists I wear the only helmet we could find, leaving her hair blowing wildly in the wind, sunglasses glued to her barely made-up face. As soon as she takes off, I silently thank Jesus-Mary-Joseph, Allah, Buddha, and anyone else listening for this flimsy piece of plastic that might, if I'm lucky, vaguely protect my brain when we crash. Because at this rate, we're definitely going to crash. Naturally, the scooter doesn't have handles on the back, so I cling to her to avoid being flung off in the curves she takes without slowing down. It makes her laugh, and I try not to freak out too much.

Generally, I like to be in control. Playing the role of a handbag on the back of a scooter isn't my thing, but she knows the road, she knows her death machine, and I don't have many arguments to convince her to let me drive.

— You good back there?

I timidly raise a thumb to signal that I w—

But she's already sped off again.

I promise, next time I take Craig on the back of my motorcycle, I'll go easy.

We reach the airport in a single, terrifying blink. She tosses my helmet under her seat, and I have to bite my tongue to avoid suggesting she actually wear it.

I wonder how to thank her—do we kiss on the cheek? Buy her a drink?—but she's already taken off again, yelling:

— Last one there's a loser!

I watch her zigzag between the furious taxis, wondering how she's managed to survive this long, driving like that.

Some things never change, no matter what country you're in: picking up a rental car for which everything has been pre-arranged online takes the better part of a century. By the time I finally sit in the almost-clean little Golf, I wonder if it's still the same day.

Almost the entire island is one-way. Like stop signs, they respect it now and then. What an idiot I was to leave the hotel without even looking at my schedule. Surely there has to be something worth visiting on the way back to Rhodes. I even asked the mustachioed man—the one who spent five hours inspecting my documents:

— While I'm here, is there something I shouldn't miss under any circumstances?

He shot a panicked look at his colleagues, who all pretended to be busy.

- Here? At the airport?
- Not *here*-here, no. In the surroundings.
- Uh... Paradisi Beach? It's not in your direction, but that's all I can think of...

I snatched up the keys abruptly.

— Right. Thanks anyway.

So, here I am, bumper-to-bumper with a line of taxis, in the same crawling lane as the night before, banging on the steering wheel like it'll magically clear up this never-ending traffic jam.

No one's dying; I've just sacrificed half my day to travel less than ten miles round-trip. So be it, but the afternoon still has some good hours left. If only I can get organized, even just a little.

I park haphazardly in front of the hotel, slam the Golf's door like it's an old Chevy, and head straight to my room. I open my Mac, find the Excel file meticulously filled with planned visits, travel times, and estimated site durations. All while glaring at my watch, which seems to be sprinting toward dinner. If I get up a few hours earlier tomorrow, I can almost combine two days into one. I just need to move the evening planned at the port to today. That said, I also need to visit the old town, and it's so close to the port that it makes sense to do everything at the same time. Unless... Yes, unless I push it to Wednesday...

Craig's name flashes on my phone before the *Star*Wars theme even plays.

Sorry, man. Not now.

Faliraki. No. Too late. The Monasteries, the west coast, all that is too far for today. You always say I waste time trying to save it; thanks to your arrangements, I have to play it tight. What an idea to choose a hotel in an area where traffic jams are the main tourist attraction! Really, what an innate sense of optimization... The Palace of the Grand Masters, right, perfect, that's just nearby. But it closes in an hour.

And just like that, I'm done. No matter how much I copy and paste, click and drag, I'm not going to be able to create a twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth hour to make up for all the ones I've wasted since this

morning. Monolithos will still be there tomorrow, the Valley of the Butterflies won't move from its mountain slope, and the waterfall at Seven Springs will still be flowing next week.

I slam the laptop shut and decide to brood in the sun.

If you had been here, you'd have taken a bag with your magazines, sunscreen, snacks, and a bottle of water. You know well that lying around listening to time pass makes my nerves fray, watching my peers litter drives me up the wall, and it's always better that I have something to do to avoid drama.

I force a smile at the petite brunette lounging next to me as I settle by the pool—a gesture she doesn't bother returning. Fine. I distract myself by silently mocking my own choice of swimwear: a proper swimmer's suit—a 'banana hammock,' as you so charmingly put it. Everyone else wears those absurdly long shorts that make you look like you're drowning in fabric.

I slip into the water, which is as lukewarm as a footbath.

One lap to one side, I crash into the wall, one lap to the other, and I'm done. I have the whole afternoon to pretend to relax, bask in the sun, and enjoy doing nothing. Just thinking about it makes my legs tingle.

— What a bore, I mumble to myself. Just to keep busy.

If at least you had booked a decent hotel, not this glorified campground where there are more workers than vacationers, there would've been organized activities, dart contests, happy hour games, maybe

even a volleyball match in the afternoon. Instead, I'm reduced to watching the ball exchanges of the odd couple with questionable anecdotes, who have already managed to knock out every swimmer one by one.

 Hit with your fingertips, not the flat of your hand, I mutter.

Gabriel—yeah, that's his name—makes an exaggerated gesture toward me before turning to his girlfriend.

— See, Vanella? That's what I keep telling you! You're hitting with the flat of your hand when you should be using your fingertips!

No... That advice was for you, buddy.

You need to cushion the ball, I continue,
 directing my comment at him to get the message

across. Caress it. You've gotta do it with finesse. Kinda like dancing the tango.

Dancing the tango. Where does that even come from?

They stop passing the ball, and I get into the water.

— You receive the ball, cushion its movement, and use it to give it new momentum. All with delicacy. Like when you dance the tango.

I take Vanella's hand, dip her so she leans on my arm, and then gently pull her back up with a firm movement.

— Oh, yeah! Gabriel exclaims.

If some idiot had tried to tango like that with you, I'd have taught him how to *waltz*—right out the door.

I grab the ball before Gabriel can change his mind and throw it to him. He takes his time, carefully cushions his catch, and returns it...

Yes. Well. Almost. It's the effort that counts.

The vacationer on whom the ball lands returns it with a dark look.

— Sorry!

Pass, pass, splash.

- Vanella, that's a pretty name. Original. Where does it come from?
- Yeah, right, shouts Gabriel, her real name's Virginie, but *Vanella* sounds better on Instagram—obviously.

And then the ball smacks him square in the face.

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— Nice smash! I think you scored a point, Vanella!

She gives me a wink; any trace of pink has left her cheeks. Gabriel picks up his teeth and the ball, and makes an almost acceptable pass to me.

- We need to invent a backstory for that name. Say that it belonged to a Russian princess whom your grandfather fell madly in love with, that he braved the Tsar's army to win her back...
- And she died in his arms, a bullet between her eyes.

Vanella throws me the ball along with a look of despair.

— He's such a romantic.

Nice block, Gabriel—this time.

— You can join us for dinner, if you like.

I mumble an excuse as I throw the ball back.

Heading up to my room, I get caught in the holiday shuffle: hungry people heading down, tanned folks coming up, and the elevator threatening to break down on us. I try the stairs, which no one has apparently used since 1903 judging by their condition.

In less than twenty-four hours, I've managed to turn my room into a real mess. There are so many clothes strewn about it looks like the dressing room of the lead dancer at the Lido. Only the balcony has been spared so far, but that's not going to last. My towel stretches out on one chair, my swimsuit on the other, and I jump into the shower.

My body clock's still out of whack. My watch says it's seven o'clock, but I'm not hungry yet. I could go for a drink, though—but definitely not dinner

I slip on some jeans and a t-shirt to take a walk around the city while waiting for my stomach to change its mind.

The city center is just a few minutes' walk away. Take a left, go down the street, pass under an arch that looks like a viaduct for a LEGO city, dodge the cars and scooters if you can (it's advisable), and the first shops are right there as you head toward the harbor.

— Maybe you could stay at your mom's for a few days.

You looked at me like I'd suggested you join the circus before snapping back:

— Arnold is coming for dinner on Sunday.

Oh. Of course, if your favorite son was coming over to have you do his laundry, then obviously, you couldn't spend the weekend at your mom's. Or was it more because you knew your mom would kill you on the spot if you told her the news? If she had to choose, I wondered who she'd prefer to stay in touch with after the divorce.

Magaly showed up around seven. Thanks for leaving with her while you finished getting ready, we have so much to tell each other. I handed her a glass of wine and pulled your classic move—finding anything to urgently do elsewhere. Just like when Craig shows up early and you suddenly remembered you have a mountain of ironing to get through.

You barely made it through the door before your bestie unleashed a flood of Instagram photos: the classic duck-face, the "oh my gosh, you're so funny!" pose, the one where you're both holding your wine glasses and squishing together to fit in the frame, and then the inevitable bathroom selfies. Yes, in the bathroom.

Ladies, newsflash: selfies under harsh fluorescent lighting, with your friend on the toilet in the background, are not sexy. Not sexy at all.

But they get likes.

And comments too. "Oh my God, you bitches are sooo beautiful, mwah!"

I could count my followers on one hand. Well, maybe two hands, to be generous. They're the same ones in the WhatsApp group, the same ones we had a few too many drinks with last night, the same ones on Facebook. Our photos stayed tucked away on our phones. We didn't plaster them all over social media for strangers to comment, "Oh my gosh, you're sooo freaking hot, mwah." Okay, Vince might do that, but he's the only one. I'm not judging; I just don't get it. Why would anyone care about my vacation photos or my face in a public restroom? It's baffling. If I looked like a Greek god, fine, it would be another story, but a fortysomething guy who's a bit too lean, with bags

under his eyes and a receding hairline? Who on earth would find that interesting?

That's why I was even more shocked when you accused me of trying to hit on every girl I meet. If that were true, I'd be lifting weights instead of running. I'd be slathering myself in anti-aging creams and popping hair growth pills. I'd probably even pay to have those random patches of hair waxed off my chest. Basically, I'd be trying to present a more marketable version of myself, with organic packaging and a "100% Authentic" label.

You came home earlier than I expected. Not that I was waiting for you. I watched a movie—a good one, for once, not one of your unfunny comedies where you know the ending before it even starts—and went to bed and made sure to close the bedroom door. To avoid any misunderstanding. After all, you're the one

who suggested moving into Arnold's room; I wasn't going to insist on giving you the master bed and taking the couch.

Even if he was only coming by to do his laundry—oh no, sorry, to have dinner with us—Arnold might still go to his room at some point, either to grab something or to lie down while making a call. He'd notice his mom had slept there, and I was looking forward to hearing you explain why.

But from the look Arnold gave me when I opened the door, and his offended sigh as he walked past without greeting, shaking my hand, or even telling me to fuck off, I understood I wouldn't get that satisfaction. He already knew everything, probably long before I did.

Arnold is your favorite. Not that we, as parents, ever have favorites. Of course, we treat Arnold and Louis exactly the same: I don't talk to Arnold, and you don't talk to Louis. So balanced, it's almost poetic.

I'm exaggerating, of course I am. But it's frustrating to see how you and Arnold understand each other without saying a word, while he and I never seem to speak the same language. I'm too grounded for him. I like concrete things, diagrams, plans, strategies—not vague ideas that might land somewhere if we get lucky. He wants to get a degree in psychology, fine, but he doesn't even know why. Every time I ask where it's going to lead, he just says he doesn't know yet and we'll see. I tell him it's better to have a plan before diving into a four- or five-year

adventure, but that always leads to us tearing each other apart.

I know, I know he needs to find his own path, make his own mistakes, and he doesn't need me holding his hand. I didn't want to be a project manager for a gambling company when I was his age, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I gave up on becoming an astronaut or veterinarian around ten, and after that, I had a long period of I don't know that really panicked me and I want to spare him that. Those sleepless nights, wondering if choosing one path over another would make me the next Einstein or leave me homeless—those nights are unforgettable, and not in a good way. I just wanted to help him. But as I've said—and as you've reminded me more times than I can count—I'm wrong to look down on him,

wrong to try to share the benefit of my experience. It's a concept parents invented to reassure themselves.

So, I don't talk to him about his degree anymore, which annoys him, which annoys me. He accuses me of not caring about what he's doing and inevitably turns to you, who tells him he's right, that he's the smartest, the strongest, the most handsome, the most talented. And I finish my cold roast in silence, half-listening to you two and calling myself a big idiot.

Fortunately, there's Louis.

With Louis, it's different. We're buddies. We support the same soccer team, we have the same sense of humor, the same urge to tick off boxes. We don't waste a second. While everyone else complains about their teenagers spending all day sleeping or grumbling, mine spends his time kicking me into gear

so we can go faster, and there's nothing more motivating than that. Louis and I are alike. In our habits, our gestures, the way we speak. We even look alike, though I'm not sure if that's more flattering for him or for me. He tells me about his romantic mishaps with his girlfriend—I think I should add an "s" there—and we laugh about it over a beer on FaceTime.

I miss Louis.

Sunday's roast was cooked to perfection. The sauce was delicious, the potatoes perfectly crispy. It should have been a perfect Sunday.

— Your father and I have decided to separate.

I nearly choked on my potato. It lodged itself halfway down my throat—just like the rest of my words.

## - Mathilda!

Arnold didn't even pretend to be surprised. He just slowly turned his head toward me, his eyes full of contempt. He looked at me as if to say, What did you do to make her come to this? Or, About time. Or, She won't have any trouble finding someone better.

- It would have been nice if we had discussed how to announce the news... It's still a bit fresh.
- How long did you plan to wait? I've had this on my mind for so long that I needed to tell my son. He has the right to know; it concerns him too.

I dropped my fork on my plate. My appetite had vanished.

— And Louis, are you planning to send him a text? A Snapchat? Or did you not think that he might also be concerned by the situation?

Arnold turned to you, blatantly ignoring me.

— Does this change anything about my apartment?

Unbelievable. How did we raise someone so infuriatingly selfish?

No, of course not. It doesn't change a thing,
 honey. You still need a place to live.

Your hand rested on his. It should be resting on mine. *We'* re the parents, *we'* re supposed to support each other.

— No, it doesn't change anything, I confirmed, without much choice. After all, *I* am the one paying

for it—for your car, for your studies—why would it change anything, right, Mathilda? We didn't need to discuss that either.

- You're such a jerk.
- Watch your mouth, son. You're an adult now; I can slap you across the face without ending up in jail.
  - Edward!

And there it was.

Happy Sunday.

I got up from the table without waiting for dessert. You all had plenty to talk about—things I neither wanted nor needed to hear.

I went into the garage; I don't remember exactly why. I paced like a caged lion, fighting the urge to

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throw him out and tell him to shove his apartment, overwhelmed by the urge to apologize, even though he didn't deserve it. Just to make things right. I didn't want to fight with my kid. I couldn't lose both my wife and my son, not in the same weekend.

7

It's not obvious at first glance, but there are quite a few things we agree on, you and I. Vacation souvenirs, for instance. We don't like them. They never fit in the suitcase when it's time to come home, and let's face it—we know that once we put that blue-embroidered linen shirt in the closet, it'll never see the light of day again. Except maybe the day we finally get the courage to toss it into a trash bag.

We've all been there—buying the hilariously tacky beach towel that no one finds funny once you're back home. Or the frilly skirt that's perfect when it's hot—except we barely get the right kind of summer weather. It's either sweltering heatwaves or chilly sea

breezes that make you wish you'd brought a jacket. The stylish hat (that's the problem—stylish), or the classy swimsuit that only looks good with that golden tan you know will be gone in two weeks. You walk into a shop and come out ten minutes later with fifteen bags, even though, deep down, you know you're making a mistake.

Breaking up was a mistake too. You'll realize that eventually. You'll walk out of the store, look at your bags, and think it was better before.

Not everything is rosy, and certainly not everything is blue—unless you're living in a Picasso painting, which, newsflash, isn't real life. You need the worst to recogn—

— Hello.

Oh... Hello.

Two young women are standing in my path.

— Good evening.

I must look just as intrigued as I am flattered, because the taller one feels the need to clarify:

 — We're staying at the same hotel. We saw you at the pool earlier.

They saw *me*? Maybe they saw me, but I sure didn't see them; I would've remembered.

And kicking right off with the number one rule straight out of the *How to Sound Like a Total Creep* handbook:

—Are you here alone?

Ah, Eddie, you're really nailing it. Move over, Casanova.

— Yeah. You?

— Uh... No, I'm with friends. They left... They went to see a...

And a bad liar on top of that. Bravo, you're on a roll.

The two girls shift from one foot to the other.

— Do you want to grab a drink? Alicia and I were just saying it's a bit early to go back. It's our last night here.

How could I refuse? It's their last night, after all!

— Do you know a quiet bar? It would be nice if they served something to eat too, otherwise I'll be tipsy after two drinks.

Oh, we're already talking two drinks?

They're charming. Not my type at all, but cute, a bit naïve—but the sweet kind of naïve. They apply the

oldest trick: Make the guy believe he's handsome, strong, intelligent, and funny, and he'll think you're a goddess.

The bar is noisy (oops), crowded (double oops), but the acoustics are just good enough for us to hear each other without having to shout. We follow the step by step from Pointless Conversation Before Making Out, starting with harmless topics to get warmed up before venturing into more slippery territory. Quick rundown: best friends since grade school, started their own beauty salon together (I throw in the usual compliments where applicable), both single (okay...), first trip in three years since they opened the place. I give them a slightly polished version of my life story, because that's how it works, right? Each side offers a small tidbit for the other to nibble on, and we slowly get to know each other.

Alicia starts giving a detailed review of the latest series she's seen on Netflix, which allows me to dive into the plate of tacos that has just landed on our table without missing a bite (of the tacos, not what she's saying). I get an earful about the drama of changing Pilates class schedules, a bit of CAC40—which has no business being there—we quickly dismiss religion, and then Alicia changes the subject in a disconcerting way:

— Are you in an open relationship?

I choke on a handful of tacos.

— Excuse me?

She gestures with her chin towards my greasy hand.

The wedding ring.

Fuck.

I hide my hand under the table like a kid caught stealing cookies. Damn it. Why hadn't I taken the stupid ring off?

— That means no, she says with a smirk. Or she doesn't know.

Oh, that little condescending smile. I like the other one, but Alicia... I hope they change her Tuesday evening Pilates schedule again just to spite her.

— Separated. We just separated.

They exchange a look.

Oh, poor guy, one of them seems to say. I don't believe a word of it, the other seems to reply. Guess who said what.

Under the table, I tug at that damned ring, trying to pull it off with all my might. Pathetic.

— Separated, but you keep your wedding ring. Right.

I start to explain, but then... Screw it! They're the ones who walked up to me, right off the street, and invited me for a drink. And now they're making me look like the creep?

— Give me your hand.

It's not a question; it's an order. I therefore happily comply.

She grabs my ring finger, gives it a couple of testing twists, then—out of nowhere—shoves my finger straight into her mouth, right to the back.

I tense up so hard my butt practically hovers off the bench, like I'm bracing for a rocket launch. Meanwhile, my underwear is determined to make an impression of its own.

She keeps me in her mouth for a few seconds, swirling her tongue around as much as she can. I feel like the entire bar has stopped talking, like they've cut the music and turned off the lights. I hold my breath, half-expecting her to pull off some miracle dental trick and pop the ring off.

I let her finish whatever finger gymnastics she's performing, and my now-pathetic, limp finger slips out of her mouth like it's been evicted.

— Go ahead, try now.

I jump at the excuse to lower my eyes and pull on the ring with all my might.

It's not more strength I need, but rather an excavator, a winch, or a crowbar

— Well, we tried, she says, getting up. Do you know where the bathroom is?

Even if I knew, I'm temporarily incapable of articulating a single word.

I'm left face-to-face with Alicia, whose mood has shifted from dark to a full-blown storm.

- It's getting late, she says as soon as the other one disappears. Time to head home, don't you think? You know the way, I presume?
  - But, you...
- She's totally drunk. And you... you're gonna be a gentleman about this, right?

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I open my mouth to protest, not too sure what for, but she shuts me up instantly with a look so cold I swear it drops the room temperature by ten degrees.

She doesn't take her eyes off me while I go to the bar, ask for the bill, choke at the price, and leave without a glance back.

8

The elevator is so fast that I've read your message at least ten times by the time it reaches my floor. As usual, you keep it short:

Do you really think I'm an idiot?

My instinct is to come up with a snappy reply.

Deflect. Because honestly, I have no clue what you're talking about. Even if you'd somehow seen me at the bar last night, you'd have seen that absolutely nothing happened—whether that's good or bad is debatable.

— Good morning! Want some pancakes?

— No thanks, Maria. Just some cereal, I reply with a smile, even though what I *really* want is to know what the hell to say when my wife accuses me of treating her like a fool.

I decide to respond to your message with a classic question mark. Keeps me on neutral ground—can't say I'm ignoring you, but also can't accuse me of not taking it seriously.

I put my phone down, but before I can even take a breath, two steaming pancakes drizzled with Nutella land on my plate. My stomach growls at the sight, and I try to sound less eager than I feel:

- Maria! I said no!
- Your head said no, but sometimes you have to listen to your heart, Mr. Eddie.

I savor the first bite, then wolf down the second. Totally worth the calories, as they say. I'm gonna need the energy anyway if I'm serious about tackling today's plan. Because this time, I'm committed. No more lounging by the pool, no more last-minute changes—this is going to be the vacation I've been aiming for since day one. And no more drinks, either. Cross my heart and hope it's dry, like Craig always says.

Talking of which—I still owe him a call back.

After my eighteenth coffee, I promise.

I've barely swallowed my last sip when Gabriel and Vanella shuffle over in their flip-flops. Quick round of *Hey, hey, how's it going? Good, good, great,* followed by Gabriel dragging his plate over and rearranging my table like he's at home. He grabs the last bite of pancake I somehow missed.

Gabriel shovels half his plate into his mouth at once. The sight alone makes my appetite do a nosedive.

— Whadya dooinahay?

According to Google Translate, that would be:

- What are you doing today?
- Seven Springs. You know, the valley with the waterfall and everything. I meant to go yesterday, but plans fell through. I should head out soon if I don't want to get stuck in traffic again.
  - What do you think, honey?

Vanella looks up from her cereal bowl, just as surprised as I am.

He repeats,

— Seven Strings. Sound good?

- Springs. Seven *Springs*, I correct, wondering why I'm bothering.
- Elli Beach is going to be packed. Maybe we should go with him?

The short guy in the white shirt—the one who's barista in the morning and bartender by night—comes over to clear our now-disaster-zone of a table.

- Stelios! Just the man I need. What do you recommend, Elli Beach or Seven Strings?
  - Springs.
  - Yeah, whatever. Where should we go?

Stelios adjusts his glasses, like he's considering his options.

— Elli Beach? You know there are actual beaches on Rhodes, right? You're not gonna settle for Elli

Beach when Faliraki and Kalithea are just twenty minutes away by car...

— We don't have a car, Gabriel says proudly.Trying to help the environment.

He turns to me, and I bite back the urge to roll my eyes.

— You're not really a beach guy anyway, Eddie.

Let's find something that works for everyone. So,

Seven Strings?

My phone buzzes as I fumble for a noncommittal response.

A message—your response to my question mark:

How's the vacation with Craig? Because, funnily enough, judging by his Instagram, he doesn't seem to know you're together.

Damn.

Busted.

Why did I even go there? To avoid another drama? To avoid the questions, the accusations? Well done, Eddie, that didn't backfire at all.

— Ed?

Gabriel pokes me in the arm to get my attention.

- Huh?
- What time are we leaving? Ten sound good?
- Yeah, yeah. Ten's fine. Whenever.

No matter how I try to spin this, it's hard to deny you're right: looking at it from your angle, I really have made you out to be an idiot. Not intentionally, but still.

- What's your room number? We'll swing by when we're ready.
  - Let's just meet in the lobby. Easier that way.

I dab my mouth with a napkin and head back to my room, wondering how I'm going to dig myself out of this one. Do I just come clean and admit I lied? Do I tell you Craig backed out at the last second? That I came here with the intern from accounting?

Or maybe it's not just the lie itself. Maybe it's that I didn't care enough to come up with a good one.

I don't want to stereotype, but let's just say some women have a way of saying they'll be ready by half-past, and at twenty-five past, when you're grabbing your jacket and searching for the car keys, you hear the shower running. Then comes the cheerful "I'll be five minutes!" and you know you're in for another hour. That drives me nuts.

You're the queen of that. To the point where I started telling you we needed to leave half an hour earlier than we really did. Worked a couple times—small victory. Tried leaving without you once, but that backfired. I always end up turning around to pick you up after I'm done sulking, making us even

later than if I'd just waited by the door, spinning my keys and asking every twelve seconds if you're ready.

But none of that matters right now. The real problem? I'm standing here alone at the reception desk, twirling those same keys, waiting for Vanella and Gabriel. It's ten past ten, and of course, no sign of them. Whether it's him holding her up or her holding him up, I'm the idiot pacing around, waiting for them to finally show.

I'm about to ask the receptionist to call them when, finally—ta-da!—in all their glory, they emerge from the elevator, decked out in full tourist regalia.

All of it.

Apparently, Vanella doesn't share our view about vacation souvenirs: she's got a sarong around her hips shouting RHODES in blue letters, gold flip-flops

with fake leather straps climbing up her calves, a bunch of bracelets on her wrists, square sunglasses that'll be out of fashion by the end of the day, and another giant straw hat that'll fly off at the first hint of wind... She's a walking cliché. But, to her credit, a walking cliché that looks stunning. Anyone else wearing any of that would look like a tacky Christmas tree; she looks like she's stepped off the cover of a travel magazine.

Gabriel laughs when he sees my eyes widen.

— She's gorgeous, right?

Can't deny it.

He wraps a possessive arm around her shoulders, and she melts into him with a tenderness I haven't seen between them before.

I feel a little pang in my chest. There was a time when you used to melt into me like that too.

- Did you put everything in the car?
- Everything's there! I reply, proudly patting my backpack.

Vanella pouts.

— Do you have your credit card, your ID, your wallet, your phone, a power bank, your swimsuit, a towel, a change of clothes just in case, sunscreen, a fresh water bottle, tissues, breath mints for the trip, some Band-Aids... You got all that in this tiny little bag of yours?

Hm.

So that's why you always drag a full suitcase behind you wherever we go.

- I'll be right back, I call out as I rush toward the dreaded elevator.
  - Hurry up, Ed. Vanella doesn't like waiting!I prefer not to dignify that with a response.

When I get back down, they're deep in conversation with Maria about *Titanic*. Why *Titanic*, why Maria, I couldn't care less.

— So, we all set? Gabriel asks, slapping me on the shoulder like *they've* been the ones waiting for *me*.

He wedges himself into the front seat of the Golf, and let Vanella slip gracefully into the back. I thought I was talkative, but I'm learning from the best. He starts talking the second the car door closes, and I'm parked at Seven Springs before he even reaches his first breath, let alone an exclamation point. I learn more about his family, his new TV, his passion for

Formula One, how he and Vanella met, how they broke up once (a while back), the names of the children they'd have, his work colleagues, and even Vanella's relentless stalker who made them move last year. Not to mention details—way too many details—about their relationship, couched in the kind of jabs couples think are playful.

— I'm just teasing, honey...

Yeah, those kinds of little phrases to wrap it up. We'd mastered those too, remember? To an observer, it might look like a showdown at high noon, but *don't* worry—I'm just kidding, darling. In the moment, it feels satisfying, you think maybe, just *maybe*, the other person will finally get it this time.

Spoiler: they never do.

In the back seat, Vanella is snapping photos out the window and Googling the history of the Seven Springs. If Gabriel and I were hoping for some epic King Arthur story set in the land of Zorba, we're disappointed. No knights, no damsels in distress, just seven streams that once converged here to form a waterfall. And wear good shoes because the trail is tough.

Reading that article *before* we left would've been wise; Vanella might have worn something other than macramé sandals.

Tired of picking them up every ten steps, she finally decides to walk barefoot, which allows us to move at a pace that's more like walking and less like cha-cha-cha—one step forward, two steps back.

Gabriel does his best to get me to talk about myself. He tries the direct approach, sneaks in a few subtle passes, but the cicadas (Crickets?

Grasshoppers?) are on my side, getting louder every time he aims a question at me.

Finally, we reach the foot of the famous waterfall. It's no Niagara Falls, obviously, but the sound, the cool mist, the constant rush of water crashing against water—it's like the bass line of a song cranked all the way up. You feel it in your bones. The clear lake calls out to us, but I'm fixated on the waterfall itself. I want to feel its weight pounding on my shoulders, like it's giving me a reason to let them slump; to feel its force slamming against my back, giving me an excuse to straighten up; to let each drop carve into my sunburned skin, erasing the scars of too many sleepless nights.

— Can you take a picture of us?

Gabriel, chest puffed out; Vanella, lazily draping her sarong to show off one perfectly tanned thigh, the two of them wrapped up in each other—it's their magazine cover shot. A snapshot of new love, still in that clingy stage, before they learn to stand on their own. The kind of photo we used to have in our albums back before everything went digital.

— Come on, let me take one of you!

I hop onto the rocks in front of the waterfall—
perfect pedestals for Instagram posts with hashtags
like #SevenSprings #SadSingleGuy. I flex my biceps,
strike a pose, maybe smile too much. Vanella comes
over to make bunny ears behind my head just to
make herself laugh. We lose our balance, and before I
can even brace myself, we tumble into the water.

For a second, there's nothing. No sound, no gravity, no sunlight on my neck, no Vanella giggling in my ear. No sense of time or space. Just this endless blue, everything mixing together in perfect, silent harmony. A moment of peace, of calm. I cling to it with all I've got, praying it'll hold me there.

That's how it happens, I guess. You don't plan for it; you don't scheme for it. It's the right moment.

Because the train arrives. Because you're in the middle of the bridge. Because there's really no point in continuing.

A hand grabs my shoulder. Pushes me or pulls me—I can't tell. Noise, light—everything crashes back into me. The movie's rolling again.

— Did you swallow some water or what?

Gabriel hauls me out of the way like I'm a rag doll, Vanella's laughing her head off. I think I am too, which is probably why I end up actually choking on water this time. Gabriel deserves what's coming—strong as he is, I'm a better swimmer than him. Water's my element.

## — Man, this feels great!

He flops back in, splashing everyone around him, and roars with laughter.

But I'm still caught between two worlds—one foot in this sunlit, noisy reality, the other anchored in that quiet blue below. I'm here, I see them, I hear them, but I'm stuck in that quiet blue, like I'm in two places at once. Sitting on the edge, I watch the film of

Vanella and Gabriel, playing like carefree puppies in the water, torn between hitting pause or fast-forward.

They finally tire of their antics and come sit next to me, one on each side.

— You've got goosebumps, Vanella points out, like she's solving some great mystery.

She rummages through my bag, pulls out the towel, and wraps it around me, then dries Gabriel, who's soaking it up—literally and figuratively.

— Shall we go? Vanella asks once her husband is as dry as my soul.

For once, no one can say I'm the one who wants to leave first, no matter where we are. That I'm always thinking about the next step, never the moment we're in.

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I get up, grab my things, and wait for them at the start of the path.

— What are you doing, Eddie? It's this way!

They're standing by a sign that marks the beginning of a trail into the valley.

Damn it.

We wander into this mix of Avatar and Robinson Crusoe, hopping over streams, leaping from stump to stump like a bunch of kids, snapping photos when the light hits just right. We retrace our steps, go for another swim, then sprawl out in the sun to dry off. Vanella rests her head on Gabriel's chest, and I catch myself trying to remember what it feels like—holding someone close, that warmth, the electric jolt when your hand would rest on my stomach. That shiver when your fingernail would trace along my thigh, your breath hovering near my lips. Stuff I thought I'd forgotten, but turns out, it's all still there, stashed away, waiting for me to dig it up again.

— Want some sunscreen?

I snap back to reality.

— Oh, sorry—were you asleep?

Vanella is rubbing a thick layer of sunscreen into Gabriel's back.

— No, no, I was just... somewhere else.

I decline her offer politely, pretending we need to leave soon. Truth is, the idea of a stranger's hand on me freaks me out.

I lay back down, trying to catch the fragments of memories now slipping away, chased off by the excited murmurs of the two lovebirds. I can feel it coming. Gabriel's been quiet the entire short drive back to the car, casting long, questioning glances my way. I act like I don't notice, letting the hum of cicadas fill the silence, but his little smirk tells me he's got something on his mind.

It's not until we hit the main road that he settles into his seat, crossing his arms and leaning back against the door.

- So?
- So, what? I try to play dumb, but I know it's not going to work. He's not the type to drop it that easily.
- Come on, spill it. I can tell you're dying to let it out.

I take a few seconds to put together a quick, harmless summary what whatever the fuck has happened to my life over the last couple of moths, mainly to keep him off my back. But those relationship columns you read in magazines might actually be onto something—sometimes it *is* easier to talk about your problems with someone you barely

know. What I planed to tell him and what actually comes out end up being two completely different stories. The more I talk, the more I realize just how much this whole situation is messed up; how much it has messed me up. I let it all pour out—the things I haven't told you, the answers I kept to myself for reasons I don't even understand—they all just tumble out at once. I'd like to say I feel lighter afterward, but no. I just feel dumb.

- You think she's got someone else? Gabriel asks.
  - Of course not! I snap back, a little too quickly.

I catch Vanella's glance in the rearview mirror. I want to remind her that cheating isn't the *only* reason people break up. At least, I hope not.

— You still love her, don't you? Gabriel presses.

In the rear view mirror, I can see Vanella shooting him a disapproving look. She doesn't even put down her phone to throw a punch:

— That's a really stupid question. He still hasn't had a proper conversation with his wife—he's miles away from moving on. He's just sticking his head in the sand. Denial, plain and simple.

Great. Nothing like being talked about like you're not even there.

 He still acts like he's in a relationship. She's left him, but he hasn't left her.

Just ask the woman from last night if I'm still acting like I'm in a relationship...

— She's got a point, Gabriel adds, obviously backing up his girlfriend. Maybe you just need to tell her everything you've told us.

— Not *everything*, everything.

Vanella sighs, leaning back, exasperated.

— Yeah, not *everything*, everything, Gabriel agrees with a nod.

I'm relieved when I finally pull into the hotel's parking lot and put an end to their tag-team therapy session. They put away their opinions, and everyone piles out of the car.

- How much do we owe you? At least for the gas? Gabriel asks.
- It's fine, don't worry. Consider it your therapy fee.
- No, really, Eddie, we said we'd split it, you'll upset me.
  - Seriously, it's no big deal.

He stashes his wallet back in his pocket with a sigh.

- Okay, but let us treat you to dinner. What kind of food do you like?
  - Gabriel, really, it's not—
- We saw this traditional restaurant in the old town we wanted to try. Eight o'clock sound good?

Saying no again would start to seem rude.

— Alright, fine. But not tonight. I'm wiped out, and I promised my kids I'd call them—it's Louis's birthday, and... I wanted to open presents with him, you know. On WhatsApp, I mean, not...

Lies, lies, lies. I stop myself halfway through digging my own hole. If I'd at least said it was Arnold's birthday, it might've flown under the radar for a few more weeks, but no, of course, Louis comes to mind first. Daddy's boy. I promise myself I'll call Arnold, then. To make up for it.

- How old is he? Tell him happy birthday from us, Gabriel says.
- Will do, thanks. How about tomorrow night?
  Or Sunday?
- Sunday works better, right, Vanella? We've
   got a little date night planned for tomorrow.

She nods, and Gabriel opens his arms for a hug instead of a handshake. Vanella plants a kiss on my cheek as she heads toward the elevator.

## — Thanks again!

I watch them head up the hall, hand in hand, unable to keep another small pang of jealousy from

tightening in my chest. I hear Gabriel asking Vanella, "Do you have the key card?" By reflex, I reach into my pocket to check for mine.

I pat down every pocket, one by one.

— Damn it...

At the far end of the hall, Gabriel holds the elevator door open as they squeeze in.

— You coming up?

I mumble something unintelligible, and they wave as the doors close. I shuffle back to the reception area, stuck behind a parade of blond heads that seem to take forever to check in.

Very proud to keep my promises, I jump on the occasion to dial Arnold knowing perfectly well he

won't pick up- Arnold never picks up when I call him.

— Hello.

I hiccup in surprise, having suddenly no idea why I was calling him.

I step away from the counter, suddenly aware of the air conditioning hitting my shoulders and making me shiver.

- Hey, Arnold. How's it going?
- Did you call them?" His tone is sharp,irritated, dripping with accusation.
  - Who?
- For fuck's sake... I sent you like a thousand texts—did you even read them?

— I just got back. I haven't had a chance to check.

And watch your language.

He gives an exaggerated sigh of frustration.

— There's an issue with the deposit for my apartment. You should've sent it last week. You need to call the agency right away, or I'll end up on the streets, and I have *no* intention of coming back to—

He cuts himself off abruptly, swallowing the end of his sentence. Back to where? Our house? His mother's place?

I grit my teeth, already on edge.

- I thought your mom was handling that?
- Aren't you tired of blaming everything on her? he snaps. She told me it was *your* responsibility. So

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pick up your damn phone and sort it out with them.

Right now!

I clinch my teeth, take a breath.

— Okay, okay, I'll see wha—

Silence on the other end.

— Arnold? Arnold, I'm still—

Jesus Christ, how did we raise such an ungrateful jerk?

The three blond heads are still planted at the desk, asking the poor receptionist anything and everything.

— Where's the nearest bus stop? Do you have a schedule?

My mood sours even more. I take a step forward, making sure they realize they're not alone and can *maybe* speed things up a bit.

— What time does the bar close? What, so early? Can we connect Netflix on the TV in the room? Or Apple TV? Where's the pool table? What time does the pool close? What? Eight o'clock? But after that, can we still...

I clear my throat, loudly. The receptionist glances at me, giving a sympathetic smile, and I get a quick I'll be right with you. But the Swedes (I got that not just from their transparent blond hair but also from their passport covers—clever) don't seem to get the hint and continue with their endless list of questions:

— What's the Wi-Fi code? How does the pool table work?

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I finally lose patience.

— Excuse me...

One of the blond heads turns.

Up close, he looks even younger than he did from behind. Swedes must be born tan but without any facial hair options. He sizes me up, then turns back around to ask if there's almond milk at breakfast because he's allergic to regular milk.

— Excuse me! I say again, louder.

The kid turns around, even slower this time.

Alright, buddy. You work out, I get it. But I don't need a protein shake or steroids to take you down if you push me too far.

— Can we help you?

God, that irritatingly fake British accent...

- You, no. But she can, I say, nodding toward the receptionist. Once you're done with all your dumb questions, that is.
  - Mr. Eddie? Is everything alright?

Maria's voice comes from behind me.

— Yes, yes, I was just trying to explain to this young man...

But the kid's already turned back around and resumes rattling off questions with his friends. Back to Maria:

- I lost my room key. My key card.
- I can help you with that.

She steps around the counter and takes a seat at one of the computers.

— Room number?

— I find you very nosy... Does your husband know? I tease.

She tries for a disapproving look but ends up breaking into a smile.

- **—** 304.
- Can I see your ID?
- Everything's in my room, obviously.

She crosses her arms and gives me a pointed look.

- Really?
- Really. And I can't exactly ask you to follow me up there. That'd be completely inappropriate.

She purses her lips.

— Sorry. No ID, no card.

- This is a problem.
- The couches in the lobby are pretty comfy, or so I've heard.
- I was hoping for something a little less...

  public. You see, I usually sleep naked. Wouldn't want
  to make anyone uncomfortable.
- We'll put up a 'Parental Guidance Suggested' sign. No minor allowed.
  - And how old are you?
  - Seventeen and a half.

I burst out laughing.

- What's so funny? Don't think I could pass as a fresh, innocent seventeen-year-old?
- In every flattering way, Maria, no, you don't look like a teenager.

She blushes just a little as she types into the keyboard, and I shift my stance, feeling the desk pressing against my hip. The space feels tighter than it did a second ago.

Next to us, the Swedes are still at it.

- Where's the karaoke happening tonight?
- In the daycare center, I reply without missing a beat.

After a moment's hesitation, the kid murmurs,

— I didn't know there was a daycare center...

11

Heeelp!

I jerk awake with a start, letting out a small yelp before I even know what's happening. My heart's pounding, my head spinning.

I need somebody, Help!

That's when it hits me: freaking karaoke.

I sit back down on the bed for a minute, just enough time to gather my thoughts and let the adrenaline bouncing around in my veins settle down. Who's the idiot who chose this song to kick off the evening?

When I was younger, so much younger than today...

I vaguely remember seeing a flyer announcing that the evening starts at nine o'clock. Have I slept all this time?

I always get a headache when I wake up from a nap, and this is no exception. Headache and famished. The sad sandwich we ate earlier is long gone by now, and my stomach is gearing up to scream *foooooood* as soon as possible.

Help me if you can, I'm feeling down...

I splash water on my face, trying to shake off the lingering traces of sleep. I had dreams... the kind you can't remember, but the shivers still run down your spine. The kind you don't want to remember.

Help me put my feet back on the ground...

I stumble into a pair of jeans, still groggy. I make sure not to leave the key inside the room this time, and sleepwalk my way to the elevator. I could just stay there, leaning against the mirror with my eyes closed, waiting for the end of the world if I weren't so hungry.

Maria waves enthusiastically when she sees me arriving at the restaurant completely packed.

- I kept your table as long as I could, but when I didn't see you arrive...
  - No problem, Maria. Any table will do.
- I'm afraid you'll have to wait a bit; they're all taken. It's always like this on karaoke nights.

My stomach drops.

— And if I take a seat at the bar? Would that work?

Maria raises an eyebrow, looks from the bar to me, trying to match the two (don't worry, Maria, the bar and I go way back), and finally shrugs with a relieved "Sure!"

And I do appreciate you being 'round...

Amid the wild applause, I fill my plate and go to sit on one of the barstools, with the cool guys. I'm all alone.

Stelios, the bartender, calls out from a distance.

- Hey!
- Hey.

Don't ask me for more tonight; mate, my head feels like it's just gone through a blender.

Sigh.
— Nothing.
— You don't like karaoke?
— I do, but my head's a bit
A vague, meaningless gesture apparently
manages to finish my sentence for me.
— You just need a little pick-me-up. What would
you like?
— A glass of sparkling water. With a slice of
lemon, let's be wild.
— Why not a little cocktail instead? I can make
you whatever you want. Within reason.
— That's kind of you.

— What will you be singing?

Subtle subtitle: Fuck off.

I stab my fork into my broccoli. The broccoli and I give each other dirty looks. Not friends anymore, apparently.

I go to get another plate, a normal-sized one, and fill it with a nice slice of pork, some pasta, and fries.

That should get rid of my headache quickly.

Beside my sparkling water, a tumbler waits patiently for someone to pay it some attention.

 Old Fashioned, Stelios tells me with a wink. It could wake the dead.

If there's one cocktail I find hard to resist, it's the Old Fashioned. But no, thank you anyway.

I change my mind halfway through my slice of pork.

- Wow. This is some heavy shit. Your own recipe?
  - I add a little secret ingredient.
  - What is it?
- As the name suggests, it's a secret. So, what are you going to sing?
  - And you?

He bursts out laughing.

— I think it's better for everyone if I don't. We already have some serious talent tonight, if I get involved too...

And right on cue, applause, cheers, bravo, bravo, next in line. A couple well into their sixties rushes forward as their names are announced. They grab the microphones with the confidence of seasoned

performers, and the first notes of *Summer Nights* start playing through the speakers.

— Look at them, they've been coming here for at least five years, every summer. They settle onto a sunbed at precisely quarter to nine and remain there until around seven in the evening. They don't move an inch. You always wonder if they're still breathing. In the evening, they come to eat, play cards, and disappear before ten. But on Friday nights, I guarantee they come back to life. If you ask the host, I think he has at least ten tickets for them. Always the same songs. On quiet evenings, they've even sung the same song twice. It should be forbidden. There should be a moral code or something. The clients can escape, but we don't have a choice. It's torture, I'm telling you.

And as if to prove him right, harmonies worthy of slaughtered pigs tear through the music.

Thankfully, the host deems it wise to lower the microphone volume until it's almost bearable. In the role of Olivia Newton-John, even I would have been more convincing than the wrinkly octogenarian.

I finish my Old Fashioned in one gulp.

- What did you do today then?
- Seven Springs. After all your
   recommendations, we couldn't do otherwise.
  - Have you already been to Lindos?
- Lindos... People can't stop talking about it, can they. Is there nothing else to visit on this island than bloody Lindos?

— Of course there is. But tourists—well, most tourists—are only interested in what they've seen on magazine covers. The white towns of Mykonos, the medieval cities of Crete... Here, it's Lindos that gets them in. If I mention anything else, like Mount Profitis or Paradisi village, they look at me like I've lost my mind.

He offers me another cocktail that I try to refuse without much conviction.

Tell me more, tell me more...

Please, don't. This song is long enough as it is.

Stelios goes to get some ice at the end of the bar and slides my glass with a quick flick of the wrist. Just open the fingers, and there it lands. Strike. I raise an appreciative eyebrow, which he returns, very pleased with himself, and together we bellow out the famous

There's some applause—which we take for ourselves—and the host plays a zouk while waiting for the next performers. I flip through the song catalog. Out of habit, It's full of all the classics, nothing very original.

- What do you usually sing?
- It depends. Mostly rock, like Arctic Monkeys, stuff you don't have in catalog.
- You can find anything on the Net. Arctic Monkeys, I can get you the instrumental versions of songs they haven't even written yet, if you want.

— Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High? is probably my favorite.

Stelios starts humming the opening lines without hesitation.

- A man who knows his classics!
- What did you expect...

The zouk is put out of its misery without anyone being offended.

— Up next, 99 *Red Balloons* by Nena, and Sven, Oskar, and Björn are up for it. Come on, boys, the stage is yours! yells the host with far too much enthusiasm.

A little feedback, just to remind you that these are real mics held by real amateurs, makes me turn

around to see the three Swedes on stage, already proud of themselves before they've even sung a note.

— I hate the English version, says Stelios.

I nod politely—is there another one?—and we brace ourselves for the carnage, me with my elbow on the bar, him with the bar resting on his elbows.

By the end of the first verse, we exchange a disappointed glance. Their performance is too insignificant to even bother criticizing. I think they try switching to German at some point, but we're so engrossed in a conversation that's as trivial as it is engaging, and that too goes over our heads.

I'm on my (third? fourth?) Old Fashioned when the first notes ring out. Impossible to mistake them. I look at Stelios, who's trying to keep a poker face. No chance.

- Stelios! I told you I wouldn't sing!
- No choice, nobody else can do this one but you!
  - No way. Especially not after three cocktails.But I'm already standing.

I jump on stage at the exact right moment, like the guy who knows the song down to the measure and owns it. There are even one or two little "Wow!"s in the room.

I completely mess up the first line—way too high—but I manage to almost get back on my feet by the second verse.

The audience seems unresponsive to Arctic Monkeys. Sorry, next time I'll do *Mamma Mia* for the eighteenth time tonight, at least you know that one.

Behind his bar, Stelios is totally into it. I signal for him to join me; he's been waiting for just that.

It sort of feels like I'm runnin' out of time—I haven't found all I was hopin' to find...

We kill it, if I do say so myself. At least, that's how it feels, and luckily no one is filming, so there's no evidence that it was a total disaster. Two or three people clap anyway, very gracious, and I reluctantly hand the microphone back to the host while Stelios rushes back to the bar to serve customers impatiently tapping their feet.

The parade continues. We get the *Abba* compilation (surprise!), the best of Rod Stewart, the worst of Kylie, a few things I've never heard before and don't plan to listen to again.

I flip through the catalog a dozen times, absentmindedly discovering songs I missed each time. The slow song we danced to on the beach in Mexico. *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, one of the few duets we used to sing when karaoke still amused you. I can't help but smile when I see Engelbert Humperdinck. *A Man without Love; Can't Take My Eyes off You; Quando Quando Quando—*they're all there.

And, tucked away at the end of the page, *The last Waltz*.

Instant flashback.

You and me, in the middle of the dance floor, all lights off except for two big spotlights on us. My heart's pounding, with excitement, pleasure, and a bit of terror too; I've never been a great dancer, and it's definitely not the time to trip on the carpet.

I had the last waltz with you

Two lonely people together

I'm counting all the one-two-threes in my head. Right. Left. Heel, heel, toe. There it is. The first step of a new life, that of husband and wife. Right, left, heel, heel, toe. My head spins slightly; the champagne has something to do with it, and I wish it could last a lifetime. That's what we promised each other just a few hours earlier. Right, left, heel, heel, toe. The faces around us blur into the shape of a crescent moon. Bubbles of smiles burst as we turn our heads. Right, left—fix a spot on the horizon!—heel, heel, toe, but it's only your eyes—right, left— I want to look into. For eternity. And if this waltz makes us dizzy, if we lose our footing, you'll be there for me, and I'll be there for you, heel, heel, toe.

But the love we had was going strong

Through the good and bad, we'd get along...

I hold you tighter. The rhythm speeds up, right, left, and we follow it, confident, heel, heel, toe, your fingers in mine, your hand on my hip, becoming one, matching every slightest movement, twirling faster, faster, faster still to the sound of the husky voice.

It's at the end that we lose our balance. A misstep, a mistake. Right, left, heel, toe, heel. Perhaps it was a premonition. Except during our first dance, we were there to catch each other. We didn't let each other fall. Do you remember, Mathilda? We smiled at each other, just like we still did. The guests joined us to finish the last few measures and accompany us until the next day.

— Another one?

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The dance floor, the guests, and the lights vanish.

And then the flame of love died in your eyes

My heart was broke in two when you said "Goodbye"

—No, thank you, Stelios. I think I'm gonna...

Another indistinctive gesture.

He shrugs.

I stagger upstairs, unsteady. Not just because of the alcohol.

In my room, there's only emptiness. Silence. No one to grumble, to tell me to be quiet, to point out that I've been away too long. No *high-heel*ed shoes in the wardrobe, no magazine on the nightstand, no head on the pillow, no hand to hold as I fall asleep.

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So this is what the after looks like.
A void.
Vast, silent.
Claustrophobic.

I sleep for hours, drifting in and out for what feels like forever. The alarm rings. Once. Twice. Over and over again, until it fades into the background, a dull, relentless hum I barely notice. I pull the sheets tighter around me, curl up, and wait for it to stop.

I stir every so often—a door slamming, someone shouting by the pool—and each time, I try to convince myself I should get up. I can't just lie here, sinking deeper into the mattress, buried under the weight of the sheets. But I'm so tired. Exhausted. Every time I open my eyes, it feels like whatever energy I have left drains away. The sheets feel heavier. Even rolling over seems like too much effort. So I drift back off,

telling myself I'll get up in a minute. Just... one more minute. I'm just tired.

Not sure when I finally drag a foot out from under the covers. It's like lifting a boulder. Somehow, I pull myself into the bathroom. I sit down to pee, not even bothering to turn on the light—I can't bear to see my reflection.

Showering, eating, opening the curtains... What's the point.

I slip back into bed and lie there, pretending to sleep.

If the housekeeper hadn't knocked, I'd still be there.

— Not now.

The door opens anyway.

## — Not now!

Murmured apologies. The door closing. Footsteps fading.

My back hurts, my neck hurts—everything hurts.

But what aches most is somewhere deeper inside.

I change my t-shirt—it reeks of memories. Then I head downstairs. Through the empty hall, turn right.

I just want to walk. Walk for hours, with no aim, without seeing anyone. Just walk. Straight ahead, until the Earth stops. Until the rocks turn to pebbles, the pebbles to sand, the sand to salt.

Walk. Straight ahead.

Cold claws clamp around my ankles, scratching at my legs, tearing at my thighs.

Walk. Straight ahead.

The waves hit me, relentless. That same sea that once cradled me so gently now lashes out with fury. Brutal. Vengeful. It claws at my legs, pulls at my clothes, trying to drag me under. A surge of water buckles my knees, sends me sprawling. The salt burns my lips.

I stay there, motionless, as the sea tosses me, each wave shaking my body until the cold pierces through my skin and sinks deep into my bones. I welcome it. At least it's something. A sensation. A reminder that I'm still here.

I let the water rise, cover my ears, and muffle the world. I close my eyes. Shut everything out.

And let myself suspend beneath the surface.

The Jersey Shore—everyone was talking about it.

The boardwalk, Cape May, Atlantic City. It buzzed through magazines, on TV, and in classrooms as soon as summer hinted at arriving. We wouldn't even think about going abroad; it wasn't something people did back then. Not where we were from.

Flying is a luxury for billionaires, my father would say every chance he got, and we're not even hundrednaires.

So, we'd pack the car, cramming ourselves, family and friends, into some rented beach house further down the country side—next year, they'd

promise, next year, we'll make it to the coast—and we'd make do. Waking up late, going to bed even later, and eating whenever and whatever we felt like.

My memories of those vacations have the pastel, sun-bleached quality of old Polaroids. All of us lined up in front of some tiny seafood joint, posing in a blow-up pool, Italian ices melting down our fingers. They taste like overcooked hotdogs off a grill, sour candies fizzing on our tongues, and smell like the sunscreen my mom slathered on us at every opportunity. The soundtrack was our laughter and the few songs my uncle knew how to play on his guitar around the campfire. He only knew about five, and we hummed them from morning to night as some sort of anthem for those fleeting weeks of summer.

I had to wait until I was at that awkward age—when girls were starting to become interesting but still totally incomprehensible—for my parents to finally agree that Craig could come with us. We didn't even worry about whether my cousins would like him. Everybody likes Craig. Everyone but you.

The second he got out of the car, he was invited to join the cousins for a pickup game of soccer. My aunt chased after him, offering lemonade, and even the Hendersons' Labrador decided Craig was his new best friend.

- Eddie! Come help me unload the car! my dad would shout.
- Jack, cover yourself, please! my mother would murmur absentmindedly, marching toward the house where her brother waited with open arms.

My father never covered up. He'd spend the whole two weeks shirtless, squeezed into shorts that were way too small, rain or shine. My mom never stopped asking him to put a shirt on, and he never stopped telling her that he only had two weeks of vacation a year, so she could let him be for these two weeks, for crying out loud!

— Eddie, go help your father, please. With his heart...

It wasn't his heart condition—if he even really had one—that got him. No, it was an accident. A simple car accident. Bike against truck. He didn't stand a chance; the doctors tried to convince us he didn't suffer. At least there's that, my mother kept saying. At least there's that.

She hid it well but she must have been relieved, somehow. At least, I was.

- And Craig, can't he help us unload the car?
- Leave your friend alone, he's on vacation!

The older kids looked after the younger ones, and the adults kept an eye on their drinks. It's a miracle nothing worse ever happened than a scraped knee or a wasp sting. We spent our time bouncing between the pool and the lake, convincing our parents we waited a full two hours after lunch before going back in the water. Some of us could swim well enough, but not everyone. When I think back on how careful we were with Louis and Arnold, not letting them near a puddle without life jackets, floaties, and a GPS tracker stuck in the butt—just in case.

It was during one of those summers that Craig had his first heartbreak. Because of my cousin Melonie, the one we always teased about her being "called with a typo". She gave him his first kiss behind some bushes on the path to the lake, only to tell him two days later that he wasn't mature enough for her.

— I'm almost two years older than you, that's a big deal, at our age, she explained in a very grown-up, matter-of-fact tone.

That's how it started—the confessions, the latenight talks. Every time Craig's heart cracked, he'd bring the pieces to me. Once his little heart was patched up—which, luckily, didn't take that long—we'd go back to our gladiator battles, sack races, and competitions to see who could wolf down the most chocolate cake without getting sick before my parents

caught us. We built rafts and watched them sink, surfed on styrofoam boxes, but above all, we spent a lot of time building ourselves, slowly becoming who we would be. That was probably what took the most effort.

 — Who wants to go to the market? my mom would ask every morning around ten.

Craig and I would exchange a glance, and if we were hungry, we'd follow her to the market, pestering her until she got us a chocolate croissant or a sourdough loaf we'd eat on the way back, slathered with butter and jelly. Craig always offered to carry the bags.

— You see, your friend has good manners. Not like some people...

It didn't happen often, but I remember once, she stood firm and wouldn't budge. She calmly explained to Craig that she was going to make a special lunch since it was Saint Jack's Day, and she didn't want to see us picking at our plates because we'd stuffed our faces that morning.

No one ever called my dad Jack. He was always Jacky. Even I took a second to realize who she meant.

She'd already taken care of the appetizers, picked up a huge stuffed pork roast, veggies that no one would touch, and was looking for a cherry pie—her favorite.

I let Craig carry the heaviest bags on the walk back and dragged my bare feet behind my mom's orange and navy dress as she greeted everyone we passed, whether she knew them or not. I noticed she had slipped two lemon meringues into one of the bags, and I knew we'd savor them later, when my father, full and half-asleep, would be napping under the shade of a big oak tree.

She spent the rest of the morning cooking and humming, assigning us small tasks just to keep us close by. My aunt poked her head into the kitchen to offer help.

— I'm doing just fine with my apprentice cooks.Go enjoy the sun. We've got it under control.

I would have gladly traded places with her.

My dad and uncle came back from fishing around noon. We heard their voices getting closer and rushed outside.

— So, did you catch anything?

— Check these out, boys—two big beauties!

We're gonna grill them up for lunch, it's gonna be amazing!

The sea-bass were still wriggling in his hands.

— Craig, ever cleaned a fish before? Want to help me?

It was exhausting—all this attention on Craig, all the time.

I went back into the kitchen and found my mom leaning against her own version of the same stainless sink.

— You still need me?

She straightened up, brushed her hair back, and replied,

- No, sweetie, everything's fine. Go play outside, please, without even turning around. It felt odd, but I did as she said and went to find the cousins. Craig could entertain my parents if he wanted to.
- Dinner's ready, kids! Hurry up, it's going to get cold!

My stomach growled as I slipped in between

Melonie and her brother. Craig had found a spot right
next to my mom, who was pouring him a glass of
orange juice absentmindedly. My dad didn't touch his
starter, too busy explaining how complicated it was to
cook sea bream on the grill, but if done right, it would
be absolutely delicious.

— A good fish is still way healthier than a chunk of pork!

We managed to each get a few bites of the grilled sea breams he proudly placed on the table.

— What on earth made you think mushrooms were a good idea? Couldn't you just do sautéed potatoes like everybody else? Everyone knows mushrooms are awful with fish. Seriously, who makes mushrooms with fish?

He turned toward his sister-in-law, who just stared down at her plate.

— Come on, Jacky, just have a drink and relax.

The mushrooms are fine. Don't eat them if you don't want to," my uncle said, pouring him a glass of white wine.

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Craig mumbled something to my mom, and she responded with a nervous smile:

— Come on, boys, clear the table; we're not going to eat cherry pie with leftovers of some half-toxic mushroom stir-fry. Get moving, children, come on, wakey-wa—

13

## — ...kay? Hey! Hey, man!

Pain. Sharp and sudden in my shoulder. I gasp.
Water burns down my throat. Fills my lungs, stings
my eyes.

The voice echoing in my head doesn't belong to the man standing in front of me.

## — Are you okay?

I shove his hands off my shoulders, almost violently, before a spasm of coughing takes over, forcing the salty water out of my lungs and dislodging the remnants of that memory I can't shake.

— You really scared us, dude... For a second, we thought...

Thought what? Thought what?

I put up a hand to keep him at a distance. I try to say something (*Thanks? I'm fine? Go to hell?*) but the words get stuck, and another fit of coughing doubles me over, pain lancing through my ribs.

I stagger out of the water and drop to one knee.

Just to catch my breath. It's not the first time I've swallowed water, and I doubt it'll be the last.

- Do you want us to call for help?
- No, I manage to choke out. I'll be fine. If only you hadn't...

And what would've happened if he hadn't grabbed my shoulders and pulled me up?

— You sure you're okay?

A small crowd gathers around the "hero" of the day. Some have pulled out their phones, ready to record, especially if this turns into a tragedy.

I force myself to stand up, and the disappointed phones go back into pockets.

— I'm ok. I'm fine. Thanks.

I walk slowly up the beach, coughing, spitting, their curious stares boring into my back. Once I'm out of sight, I sit down on the ground, leaning forward, trying to catch more than my breath—my soul.

The dreams you can't remember are the worst. It's always what's missing that's the problem. The absence. The gaps. Even now, there's a blank space. These few seconds that slipped away right before

some stranger yanked me out of the water are forever lost at sea.

It'll pass.

That's what we always tell other people, right?

It's just a rough patch, you'll get through it. Whatever made me stick my head underwater, it's bound to pass.

Except when you're in it, it's not just a 'rough patch.' It's a chasm. One you can't leap over, no matter how hard you try. And the closer you get, the wider it stretches, until it feels like it's going to swallow you whole.

How many times have I said that to Craig? *Just a few days, man. Come on, don't worry, in a week you'll be laughing about it.* 

What a joke.

What a joke I am.

I drag my wet sneakers down the streets, wandering aimlessly. A taxi rolls up; I could raise a hand, wave it over. Call for *Help*, *I need somebody*, *Help*. I let it pass by, and keep letting the sun beat down on my neck.

I stumble back to the hotel almost by accident. The lobby smells like disinfectant. In a corner, a cleaning lady halfheartedly scrubs the floor.

I head to the pool, lie down on the first lounge chair I find, and curl up. I feel frozen inside. I wrap my arms around my legs like I used to do as a kid. I let myself fall into a sleep that's not really sleep. One where you hear the conversations, the clinking glasses, the shouts, splashes, distant music. I don't want to really sleep. I want to stay right here in this

uncomfortable position, feel my shoulder go numb,
my neck get stiff, the wooden slat dig into my hip—
just to remind myself I'm still alive.

Stelios comes over to talk, but I pretend I'm asleep. He says something about the sun, like I give a damn about the sun.

I must have dozed off again. It's all I want to do—sleep, so I stop thinking, stop remembering, stop trying to figure out how to explain to you that life without you isn't possible. That I don't even know what life is about, without you—and that I don't want to know. The thought of it scares the hell out of me.

I jerk awake so suddenly that both Gabriel and Stelios back away. I don't know which one of them was trying to wake me up. — What the hell is wrong with you...

My voice dropped an octave.

- You've been lying here for hours. We were worried, one of them says—Gabriel, I think.
  - I'm just exhausted, that's all.
  - You're also totally burned. I mean, look at you!

My shoulder's a bit red, yeah, but nothing serious.

— You should put some cream on it right away.

Do you even have any? Want me to ask Vanella?

I mostly just want them to leave me alone.

The image of my dad sticks to my vision like the sun after you stare at it too long. He left a dark spot too.

I think I was too young to understand. Or maybe I didn't want to. The looks he'd exchange with my mom's sister, the attention, the comments. Their so-called "digestive" walks alone in the evenings.

But that night, I was mad at Craig. I didn't want to go up to our room, didn't want to hear him go on about how awesome my parents were, how he'd never had better vacations.

I headed down toward the lake, passing through the crickets' chirping, lit up by the flickers of will-o'the-wisps floating by.

It was the noise that caught my attention. Groans, like a wounded animal. I moved forward, parted the branches, and my childhood shattered.

I think I grew up that night. The night you find out that the truth isn't pretty. The night you realize Santa Claus isn't real.

— Eddie? Eddie, what are you...

I closed the branches gently, without making a sound. I ran to the lake. I heard footsteps behind me, but they grew fainter and fainter until they stopped.

I went into the water and swam for hours. I wanted to swim forever.

I never really stopped.

The next year, we found another place to go on vacation. Just us. And Craig. My dad tried to talk me out of it, but by then, I'd get the last word pretty easily.

14

I let the hours slip away until the cold starts to seep under my skin. I stay a little longer—waiting for it to pass, hoping it'll last forever.

My neck cracks loudly when I try to lift my head.

My muscles scream as I shift, joints grinding like old
machinery. My bare feet land awkwardly on the stillwarm tiles, and I wince. With a dry mouth and numb
hands, I sit for a moment on the lounge chair,
shivering uncontrollably. People I've never seen
before wave like we're old friends. I wave back—an
empty gesture. I wait for the world to rewind, for a
storm to rage, for hail to pound me down, for freezing
rain to dissolve me, bone and all. A downpour, not a

drizzle. There's no need for an ark this time; there's no one left to save.

In the distance, a kid falls. Parents reluctantly pull themselves away from their phones to show some concern—just because others are watching. A girl walks past me with three plastic cups of beer sloshing over the edges. Only two make it to their destination. A phone rings, someone turns up music, another person yells at them to turn it off.

Back in my room, I undress to assess the damage. My body looks like a messed-up checkerboard, red, white, red, white, red. And when I say red, I mean scarlet. I turn my toiletry bag inside out twice. If you had packed for me, there'd be some after-sun lotion in here.

I sit on the bed for five minutes. Just enough time to get my bearings again. To fall back into a reality where you're not here. A reality where my father's not sleeping with my aunt. A reality where I have to get up and head down to the hotel shop for sunscreen.

— What's your strongest stuff? I ask.

I add an after-sun lotion to the vodka she puts on the counter.

— I'm gonna go home, I say out loud as I get into the elevator. I'm taking the first flight to Boston, and I'm going home. This is ridiculous. We need to talk. We can't keep doing this.

I cram the vodka into the fridge—a promise for later—then slump onto the balcony like a marionette whose strings have been cut. I squeeze half the tube of

sunscreen into my hand—the more, the better, right?—and start slathering it on in a thick layer, gritting my teeth at the cold sting on my burned skin. The cream multiplies under my hands, spreading and oozing like an oil slick, dripping down to form ghostly white splotches at the foot of my chair.

From up here, the world seems distant, abstract. People run, shout, kiss. I'm here, fully present, yet completely absent. Detached from the bustling world in front of me, detached from myself. I keep spreading the cream, which slides, drips, and falls to the ground like autumn leaves. Stelios walks by with a tray of empty glasses, Gabriel swims laps without Vanella, and teenagers wrestle for a spot under the umbrella.

It's all the heads turning at once that catches my attention more than the ringtone itself. Down below, the *Star Wars* theme blares.

— Shit, my phone! I curse, jumping up.

My right foot slips on a puddle of sunscreen with all the grace of an Olympic skater, and I barely catch myself on the railing.

Ta-ta-ta-ta-tada-ta-tada.

The ringtone starts up again, and frowns turn into exasperated sighs. I hop into the elevator, being careful not to put my right heel on the ground and risk attempting another triple axel. I hustle (hobble quickly) to the pool, seeing some idiot trying to stop that damn ringtone.

— Hey! Hey, that's my phone!

I take a more abrupt step than I should.

I haven't even set my foot down before I see it all playing out in my mind. My heel's going to hit the tile, slip like soap, and my only options are to either tear both my adductors or blow out my left knee.

My kneecap detonates on the tile, and a white-hot burst of agony sends shockwaves through my entire body. I didn't even have time to brace myself.

Fuck. Something's broken for sure.

— You okay, man?

I look up. The whole scene has been replaced by a row of white teeth. Framed by one of the Swedes.

He extends his hand to help me up, like I'm some old, senile guy, clumsy, bedridden, needing someone to hold me by the elbow to take two steps without

breaking my hip. Keep your hand away—I don't need you, thanks.

— I'm fine. I'm fine, I manage through my clenched teeth.

I'm not. I am *so* not fine. On *so* many levels. But the only thing I can think of is that I've broken something—no way it would hurt *this much* otherwise. And the worst part is yet to come—putting weight on my foot? I'm tempted to just lie here, sprawled out, and wait for a medevac chopper to come airlift me out.

The blond idiot tries to help again. Didn't you get the message? *I don't need your help!* 

To prove it, I—slowly—piece myself together and gather what's left of my dignity, clenching my teeth as I take a few steps to grab that damn phone that's

finally stopped ringing. I want to cry from the pain, but I act tough, say nothing, no whimpering, and continue on one and a quarter legs toward the restaurant.

As soon as I round the corner and no one can see me anymore, I collapse into the first chair I find, frantically massaging my knee, even though what I really need is a surgeon.

— Do you need some ice? That noise, man!

I shake my head at Stelios, who's rushed over. If I open my mouth, I'll either scream or curse him out.

Or both.

So, that's it.

I've been talking about going home, and it's gonna happen sooner than expected—via a helicopter, apparently—how fancy.

Maria arrives with the ice pack I just refused. She doesn't ask my opinion and slaps it on my knee, and this time, I do scream.

— Do you want us to call a doctor?

I think of the vodka waiting patiently in my fridge. That's all I need—a little kick.

- Thanks, Maria, but I'll be fine.
- It doesn't look that bad. You're gonna have a hell of a bruise, though, says Stelios, trying to convince himself.

And since when are you a doctor? Since when a kneecap in puzzle form is "not that bad"?

I thank them as best I can and hobble across the restaurant, then down the hallways, one by one, like

an eighty-year-old with one leg and a walker with flat tires.

I settle on the balcony with the vodka bottle.

Can't let all that ice Maria gave me go to waste. The only glass I can find is a wine glass—perfect for a little Bordeaux, not so much for Smirnoff, but whatever. I take a big gulp, close my eyes, tilt my head back, and like magic, my shattered knee starts to fade into the background.

It's weird that you never called me out for drinking too much. Yeah, I'm aware, of course I'm aware. It's self-medication. It numbs me. Just a glass or two after work—it's my way of preparing to face the rest of the evening. Your silence, the distance between us. It helps me cope, even though I probably should've raised the alarm instead of burying my head in the sand. But how did you not notice?

Or maybe it worked for you. There are things I didn't see, or things I chose to ignore, and maybe you weren't any worse off. I'll stop, I promise. When I get back, when things go back to normal. It's not like I became an alcoholic overnight—it's just a stupid habit. I swear I'll stop.

When I open my eyes, I lock eyes with him.

Why's he still here? Wasn't it enough to make a fool of me by the pool, offering his helping hand and that ultra-bright smile? Does he really need to hang out with his friends right across from the pool, right in my line of sight, just to rub it in?

I look away before he does, burying myself in my vodka.

At first, I can't figure out what bothers me so much about him, besides the fact that he caught me

taking a painful fall and had the nerve to make sure I was okay. Something about him annoys me. No, everything about him annoys me. The way he moves, that little pause by the pool right before he dives (diving's forbidden, by the way, can't you read?), that curious look he gives when he walks around his frie—

Shit.

I look away, but too late. He raises a hand, like he thinks I'm looking at him.

Almost at the same time, there's a knock at the door, and I get up way too fast. My knee immediately reminds me to *calm the fuck down*.

## — Come in!

One of the cleaning ladies slips discreetly through the door with her bucket and mop. This time, I don't send her away, but I do offer a small, embarrassed smile when she sees the mess in the room and the sunscreen stains on the tiles. I try to explain.

— Sorry, there was a little accident...

She shrugs in a way I interpret as, "Don't worry, I've seen worse". I pull the balcony door shut behind me to let her work in peace.

A series of annoyed, yet amused, shouts catch everyone's attention. Mine too.

From the pool, one of the Swedes finds it hilarious to spray his two friends, who are comfortably lounging on their sunbeds. Very funny. One of them jumps up and dives into the water to chase his friend, trying to dunk him. The show lasts a few minutes—just long enough to irritate the poor people trying to enjoy the pool in peace.

With a kick off their heels, the two of them get out of the water and sit on the edge.

Seeing them sit side by side, it hits me: the same square jaw, the same cowlick on the left side—a pair of twins. Different builds—one clearly spends more time in the gym than the other—and that's probably why I didn't notice before. Or maybe I just didn't care.

The third one squeezes in between them. The knight in shining armor ready to save widows, orphans—and me, when I take a spectacular fall by the pool.

I down my drink, crunch an ice cube, and think of an excuse to get a refill as the cleaning lady pokes her head through the balcony door.

— Anything else?

— No, that'll be all. Thanks.

I wonder if I should have tipped her.

With their feet in the water, the three Narcissuses are lost in their own reflections.

They have something of the Dalton brothers about them. Not in height, but in width. The skinny one, the medium one, and the broad one. The same guy seen in 4:3, 16:9, or Cinemascope. Just a matter of display format.

Cinemascope stretches out on his back, hands clasped behind his head, basking in the sun, showing off his chest.

My vodka almost goes down the wrong way when the guy in the middle places a hand on the thigh of the twin on his left, sliding it up to the seam of his swim shorts, then slowly slipping two fingers in

to expose the white of the twin's thigh. The twin just smiles, like he appreciates the attention. With one finger, the guy traces the blurred line between golden skin and that pale, milky shade that hasn't seen the sun in a long time. The other lets him.

It's not the first time I've seen two guys together—Vince has had a new boyfriend every two weeks for most of his adult life and they're usually pretty at it—so I can't understand why that hand on that thigh feels like nails on a chalkboard. It's not even indecent, not half as provocative than the couples groping each other in the middle of the day with kids around and no one batting an eye. I force myself to look away, as hard as it is when they are right in my line of sight. As hard as it is when I catch, out of the corner of my eye, the middle guy turning to his right, sharing a laugh with the other twin, sliding

his hand under his shorts, and moving it up slowly until the touch makes him shiver.

My throat tightens. I look away again, taking a long gulp of vodka.

I mean, fuck whoever you want, but *both* brothers?

I hear a splash as I turn away to go back inside. Instinctively, I glance back.

He's looking right at me.

I slam the door shut, yank the curtain closed, and limp to the shower. I crank up the hot water and take refuge in my equatorial jungle.

We all close our eyes in the shower, don't we? We let the water pour over our shoulders, our back, and we just shut our eyes for a bit. Recenter. Regroup.

I can't push that image away except that it's not him I see on the black screen behind my closed evelids. It's me. Tall, lean, with a wide smile, a booming voice, and bright eyes. It's me in the photo. Me at twenty. The one you met, the one you fell in love with, the one who loved you back fiercely. It's me by that pool—a version of me splashing my friends, a me getting lost in my own reflection and playing at kicking water. It's obvious we look alike, and that's probably what throws me. We have the same hint of smugness when we let our gaze wander over the crowd. The same shoulder movement when we feel eyes on us. The same long, slightly too-thin legs, the same stubborn chin. The same dimples. The same naturally defined chest, the same arms with biceps that are a bit shy.

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It's like looking in a mirror with a twenty-year filter. A time warp where I can almost reach out and touch the memory of whom I used to be.

16

I had a fight with Arnold last night. Totally my fault. But I clung to my pride like a drowning man to a rock, refusing to let go. Yeah, I know—*mea culpa*, whatever.

I was about to limp down to the restaurant for dinner when I saw his message. He wasn't just annoyed—he looked *furious*. And yeah, I knew calling him wasn't a great idea. But when you've downed three vodkas to numb the pain, logic kind of takes a back seat.

— What do you want?

Classic Arnold—so affectionate as always.

- Look, I'll deal with it first thing tomorrow. I tried today.
- On a Sunday? You think they're sitting around waiting for your call? Forget it, it's too late. You saw the email, right?

I hadn't checked my email.

- Jesus, Dad. (His voice cracked with frustration.) I spent *hours* finding this place. I'll never get a deal like that again. Not at that price.
- We'll find another one. There's no shortage of apartments in Boston.
- Oh, yeah, because you're gonna be the one putting in the hours? Yeah, sure.

I clenched my jaw.

- I get that you're upset, but watch your tone.
- Oh, really? Or what? You gonna hit me again like when I was a kid?

My breath hitched.

- I never laid a hand on you.
- Right. Convenient memory.

I don't have a convenient memory. I just... there are things I chose *not* to remember.

- Fine. Whatever." I swallowed hard, trying to keep it together. "I'll talk to your mom. I've got to go now, Arnold—someone's waiting for me.
  - Oh, really? Who? *Craig*?

Silence. He knew. He *had to know* I wasn't with Craig. You must've told him.

— Well?" His voice sharpened. "Or is it another one of your sluts?

My fingers tightened around the phone, knuckles white.

I lost it. I knew I shouldn't have. I knew it wouldn't help, but I snapped.

— Shut it, you idiot! You have no idea what you're talking about. None! Just parroting whatever crap your mother feeds you—same spoiled, thoughtless attitude since you were twelve. Can't think for yourself for one second. You know what, Arnold? Go—

He'd already hung up.

Probably for the best.

I collapsed onto the bed, my body shaking, heart shattered into a thousand pieces. Broken. Like everything else. Just... broken.

I kept my head buried in my hands, trying to convince myself it wasn't that bad, that maybe it'd make him think. But I knew better. I'd done the exact opposite of what you're supposed to do. I'd gone and thrown a bucket of gasoline on a fire.

Things would get better, they always do, right?
I'd apologize, buy him a PlayStation or whatever, and we'd start over—just like before. Not great, but not terrible. You can't stay mad at your kid forever.
Arnold's still my flesh and blood. We'll patch things up, with him too. Time's a healer, isn't it?

Eventually, I dragged myself downstairs, though my appetite stayed in the room. I tucked myself into a

corner of the restaurant where no one would bother me. Maria gave me a sympathetic look when she saw me sitting in her section, and I made sure to turn my back to Stelios at the bar, who was too busy to notice me. I choked down a piece of grilled chicken, planning to spend the rest of my evening in bed, watching some crime thriller everyone's been talking about.

# — Good evening!

I lifted my head from my barely-touched plate.

## — Uh... hello?

A tiny woman stood in front of me, an Orangina bottle in a Primark suit. She rattled off some pitch about a cruise to the most beautiful beaches, on the most beautiful ship, with the most beautiful views—all at a "special price" just for me.

— It's usually forty-five bucks a person, but today, just thirty! Meal included. A bus will pick you up right at the hotel at eight thirty. Or you can meet us at the port if that's easier.

— Is there much walking?

She looked taken aback, like I'd just asked if we'd be crossing the ocean on foot.

— Well, I mean... When we dock... There might be... It depends...

— Fine.

Relieved, she beamed.

— For two?

I glanced around.

— Uh... no. Just one.

She laughed awkwardly.

— Ha ha. I'm sure your wife will want to join, right?

Her pen hovered over the notepad, waiting.

— Might be a bit far for her.

Another laugh. What's with the giggles?

- It's a special offer, sir. We can't give this price for just one person.
  - Should've said that earlier.

She finally jotted down my name, room number, and other details, grumbling under her breath.

- Maybe your friends would want to come?
- I don't do friends.

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She avoided my gaze as I handed her the money, then shuffled off to the next table where a young couple gave her all the right answers.

I eventually stumbled back to my room, put on the movie. I caught the opening credits, but after that, it was mostly the movie watching me snore. Can't believe I forgot to set the damn alarm last night—what an absolute jackass. Now I'm hobbling down the street like a one-legged idiot, cursing myself for being late—I am never late, I hate being late. 'We'll pick you up in front of the hotel,' she said. Well, technically speaking, sweetheart, the end of the street isn't exactly in front of the hotel, is it?

I ignore my knee's protests and pick up the pace.

How long do these buses even wait? There's got to be some wiggle room, right? They can't expect vacationers to be as punctual as Swiss watches.

There's always someone with a last-minute bathroom

break or a lost pair of flip-flops. They *must* have to wait at least ten minutes. Minimum.

Rounding the corner, I let out a sigh of relief. A small group's gathered by the park entrance, exactly where Orangina Bottle said. Gabriel's standing next to a bare back that could only belong to Vanella.

- What happened to you? Gabriel asks, raising an eyebrow when he sees me limping.
- I hit a wall. Literally. You guys doing the cruise too?
- Yeah, but... We didn't expect to find *you* here. You think it's a good idea? With the sunburn and all...
- It'll be fine, I say, brushing him off. I'll just stick to the shade. I know that's not exactly the point of a cruise to the island's most beautiful beaches, but

hey, with my knee, I'm not going to run a marathon, am I? So I may as well sit back and let them take me around.

He nods.

— They must be raking it in with this nonsense.

What did we pay, again? Forty euros a head? And there's at least twenty of us.

I say nothing about the special price *I* got, even though it's pretty damn tempting.

— And that's not even counting the ones who went straight to the port. Vanella and I thought about doing that—taking a little stroll before boarding—but we were tight on time. Maybe on the way back.

Finally, after a fifteen-minute wait

(unacceptable!), the bus arrives. Everyone with two
good knees rushes to get on board first, elbowing

their way to the back seats. The bus rumbles through honking horns and scooters zipping the wrong way down one-way streets, and somehow, miraculously, we reach the port without a scratch.

The ship is impressive. Not a boat—no, a *ship*, all dark wood and towering masts, with cannon placements on the sides and a mermaid figurehead that seems to dare us to board if we've got the guts.

We take the dare.

We let everyone elbow their way on deck first, and when most of the crowd's settled, my good knee and I make our way up the ramp.

— Welcome aboard, matey!" the captain repeats for the fiftieth time, with the same strained enthusiasm as if it were the first. "There's still a little

space on deck if you want to maintain that beautiful tan!

I hope he's talking to Vanella. In any case, she takes it as meant for her and disappears in a flash to spread her beach towel among the others, lying there languidly. The guys lucky enough to be around her might miss some of the panorama.

Gabriel's eyes flick between me and her, caught between staying with his buddy or chasing after his mermaid. I'll let you guess who's who.

— Prosecco? the captain offers.

That's all the convincing Gabriel needs to stay with me.

One of the deckhands stops in front of us with plastic cups in hand. A shot of Prosecco at nine in the

morning, without breakfast, tears up your intestines better than a gulp of hydrochloric acid.

The captain grabs the mic just as the engines start up. Sorry to disappoint, but the pirate ship look is all for show, obviously. He goes over the morning's itinerary—some beach, some bay, some lagoon (as if any of us will remember a damn thing after two cups of bubbles)—and the ship lumbers through the water like... like an arthritic elephant.

Apparently, to liven things up, there's nothing better than the good old *Macarena*.

Like all the other sun-avoidant types in the cabin, I start shaking my hips involuntarily to the music crackling through the speakers. Twenty seconds later, we're all up, trying to remember how to dance to this ageless tune. I only remember the part where you

have to jump and make a quarter turn, like this—*Ha!*My knee does *not* appreciate the demo at all. I back out, leaving the dance floor to quietly watch the shimmering waters of the Aegean, so clear it seems like the ship's floating in mid-air. Gabriel comes to lean on the railing beside me once he's finished with his show dance.

— It's just like paradise, don't you think?

I nod, suppressing the urge to remind him that my sunburn and busted knee give his paradise a slightly bitter aftertaste.

The ship glides for a good half-hour—along with the Prosecco—until the captain's voice interrupts the music. — Ladies and gentlemen, we have arrived at Bay *Whatever*. You can jump directly off the back of the boat or go down the ladder.

My choice is quickly made. I head to the back of the boat, where a whole line's already formed in front of a little plank—one of those you'd use to make enemies walk off as shark bait. Lovely! There's laughter and shoving, people scrambling for a spot in the queue, and one splash after another. Eventually, it's our turn. Vanella, who's kindly waited for us, goes first, followed by Gabriel. When the deckhand signals me, I awkwardly step onto the plank, as graceful as a pirate on his peg leg. Perfect for getting into character. Gabriel and Vanella, multitasking pros, have already managed to get into each other's arms while staying afloat.

— Come on, Eddie, dive in!

I take a small step, a little push, and I—

What the fuck are they doing here?

In the distance, three blond heads are swimming swiftly towards the beach.

I lose my footing, slip, belly-flop into the water.

- Nice dive! Gabriel laughs when I resurface.And here I thought you were a good swimmer?
  - I... My knee, you know. My knee just... went.

We splash around for a moment as other hotel guests come to join us, bobbing in the water like a bunch of cheerful buoys.

— The water's even saltier than at Elli Beach, isn't it? Gabriel asks, stretched out on the surface as if the water itself is holding him up. Vanella's eyes are fixed on something in the distance.

- Do you want to try? she asks.
- What?

She gestures with her chin toward the beach.

— That.

I follow her gaze. Farther down, a line's formed at the base of a massive rock overlooking the bay. From up there, the view must be spectacular. We can barely make out the shouts of the little daredevils jumping off the natural diving board.

- Damn, that's high.
- Yeah. Gabriel's afraid of heights, but I love it!

She doesn't even wait for my response before shooting off in a swift crawl that could leave me in her wake if I don't pick up the pace. I force myself to keep up as we make our way across the bay, where all

the boats of the Dodecanese seem to have converged.

Thrill-seekers line up along a narrow path carved into the small hill, clustering in groups to test their bravery, their testosterone levels, and their recklessness. We join the line, which moves at a steady pace amid shouts and splashes.

- It's nice that Gaby found a friend," Vanella says, glancing back at me with a small smile. "I wanted to come here. He wanted to go somewhere cold, like Norway or Finland. I need the sun, or I get depressed.
  - My wife always says that too.
- I promised him that next year we'll go see the Northern Lights, but not in August. Maybe September, if he can take some extra time off. Have you ever been to the fjords?

— Late October or early November is the best time for the Northern Lights. It's spectacular, obviously, but that's no secret.

We inch closer to the top of the diving board, but the line suddenly slows down. At the edge of the precipice, two Swedes are posing against the backdrop of the blue sky while the third snaps dozens of photos. They puff out their chests, flex their biceps, and—snap, snap.

Meanwhile, everyone in line is losing patience. Especially me. I've never had the slightest tolerance for show-offs.

After what feels like an eternity, they finally wrap up their impromptu photo shoot and turn to face the edge. Plenty of people act macho up here, but when it's time to jump, suddenly all that bravado shrinks to nothing.

The broadest one—Cinemascope, as I've nicknamed him—is tasked with carrying the phones of the other two safely down. He strolls past us, muscles bulging and chin held high, while his buddies are still frozen on the edge. One takes a step forward, the other steps back by two. They should've thought about the height before dragging their asses up here. Now they're at the point of no return. If they don't jump soon, someone's going to help them down—and it won't be pretty.

Behind us, the grumbling has turned into full-on shouting. The two little chickens, scared of getting a boo-boo, finally take the plunge, letting out earpiercing screams as they fall. They take so long to jump that Cinemascope has time to get to the bottom

and start taking more photos of their awkward landings.

Thankfully, the next few people in line have the decency to jump without needing to be begged, and the line starts moving again. A step, a splash, a step, a splash.

My instinctive dislike for the Swedes drops just a bit—just a tiny bit—when I step to the edge of the cliff myself. From up here, damn, it's a lot higher than it looked.

For a moment, my heart tries to revolt, tries to escape down to where Cinemascope already is, camera in hand, but I catch it by the artery and bring it back. Next to me, Vanella waits, her eyebrows raised.

I make a vague gesture toward two swimmers lazily drifting away.

— I was waiting for them to get a little farther...

I could've come up with a worse excuse. She glances down, forcing me to take a step back. If there are any exasperated sighs behind me, I pretend not to hear them.

I've never been afraid of heights, right? This feels new. I can't recall ever being scared to jump, to dive, from anywhere. Maybe it's something that comes with age. You start worrying you'll mess up, that you'll break something. And with a busted knee, jumping is out of the question—the impact would turn it into minced meat. It's either a dive or die.

I take a deep breath, push off with my right leg, every muscle in my body tensed, down to the tips of my fingers. I launch myself into the air, feeling that split-second when you just *know*—know if you're going to crash like an idiot or glide into the water like a mermaid.

Mermaid it is.

I slip into the warm waters with delight, opening my eyes to an underwater world that the fish have long abandoned, tired of humans constantly disturbing them. From the surface, rays of light quiver with pleasure at the thought of bathing in the clear waters where Achilles supposedly came to heal his wounds.

I surface slowly, a bit too slowly for my lungs' liking, which could really use a gulp of fresh air.

— Wow! That was amazing! Shall we go again?

It's like everything else; once I've made the big leap, it doesn't seem like much. Vanella pinches her nose, I clench my butt, and we keep going back and forth until my knee finally gives out. We swim back to the boat, much slower than on the way out.

Gabriel's considerate enough to give me a hand as I climb the ladder.

#### — Prosecco?

By the time the ship sets sail again, my neighbor has already gone through the entire saga of his failed restaurant venture in Budapest a year ago, which shut down only two months later for reasons I can't remember. Now, he's planning to reopen in a new location, but finding reliable staff these days isn't so easy, you know, especially with the crisis and all that.

— So, what's Budapest like?" I ask when he finally pauses to take a breath.

Hungary's always been on my list of places to visit. Not on yours, though. We've talked about it a few times, remember? But no, for some reason neither of us understood, you never wanted to go there.

Maybe this is the opportunity. Maybe I could even change my return ticket and swing by Budapest before heading back. I could eat at Andres' new place before going home, and at least I wouldn't be bothering you anymore by suggesting every year that we go see Hungary.

Maybe we could even try something new: we travel separately once, each to our own dream destination—me to Hungary, you to Thailand, which never appealed to me. And then we'd go somewhere

together, just the two of us, where the destination is not the goal.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

The captain's at it again, clanging his bell like Quasimodo.

- The bar is open!" he announces.
- I thought it'd been open for a while now,"

  Gabriel manages, right between two of Andres'
  sentences.
- Now that we're halfway drunk, the *paying* bar has just opened. Clever.
  - Do you want a beer?
- I'll go," I say, standing up. "You're so good at entertaining Andres.

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Gabriel makes a face, but Andres doesn't let him off the hook.

— Have you ever been to Budapest?

Sigh.

I find myself standing behind a pretty brunette whose swimsuit leaves little to the imagination. If I'd seen her at the hotel pool before, it definitely wasn't from behind—I'd remember curves like these.

— How's the knee?

I start, turning sharply.

Ultra-Bright's staring at me, all white teeth and a hint of a smirk.

— It's fine," I reply curtly, turning back toward the beer bin and the brunette's curves—not necessarily in that order.

— It was nice.

I turn back again with a sigh.

- Sorry?
- Your dive, I mean. Not your slip.

I manage a mechanical smile, out of politeness.

He extends his hand. Seriously? These kids really don't know how to read body language anymore, do they? I don't carry emojis in my pocket to help them get the message that I don't feel like talking.

- My name's Sven.
- Gus.

I shake his hand quickly—

Wait. What?

Gus?

Where did that come from? No one's called me *Gus* since... since the *Top Gun* craze ended, and that was, like, a million years ago! They used to say I looked like Nick "Goose" Bradshaw, Tom Cruise's sidekick. Yeah, the goofball with the ridiculous little mustache. It was never quite clear if I looked like him before or after he smashed his head in the cockpit. *Goose* became *Gus* over time, and I finally got rid of that stupid nickname when I shaved off the mustache. Phew.

- American?
- How'd you guess.

I keep my tone flat—no question mark, hashtag sarcasm and turn back to the bartender.

— Two beers, please.

Okay, okay, that's a bit mean.

— *Three*, sorry. Three beers.

I can't leave Andres hanging, after all.

The bartender hands me three almost-cold cans, tells me the painful price, and I get why they've been plying us with bad Prosecco all morning.

— Want one?" I ask Sven.

Great job, *Gus*. For someone trying to get rid of an opportunist, offering him a drink is exactly the right move. Well done.

— I have to take some back to the others. But thanks.

And now I'm the one getting cold-shouldered.

Unbelievable.

I raise my can in his direction, pretending to toast to his health, scoop my pride off the floor, and go back to Gabriel, who looks delighted that I've come to rescue him from Andres' clutches. He nods towards Sven, hurrying along the deck with his arms full of cans.

- Do you know him?
- No.

The rest of the trip is a struggle. The ship lurches from side to side, left to right, sometimes right to right. One or two people almost get sick overboard (nothing to do with the Prosecco, of course, just the rolling and pitching). On deck, everyone screams in unison when the waves crash over the sunburned bodies.

- Ladiko Bay, Ladiko Bay!" the captain finally shouts, drowning out the sound of his own bell as the rocking subsides. "Masks and snorkels by the ladder, if you want them. Don't wander too far out, there are plenty of fish right here. For the more adventurous, you can go through Travanou Cave, which takes you through the rock and brings you out... right there, where that gentleman just stood up! Just make sure you're not claustrophobic—it's not spacious, but it's safe.
- Are you claustrophobic?" Gabriel asks, hopingI'll say yes.
  - A little," I lie, out of sympathy.

By the time we get there, the pile of masks and snorkels has significantly dwindled. I grab one of

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each and wait for the elderly lady in front of me to finally make her way down the ladder.

— Gus! Gus!

I look up, over the top of the elderly lady's bathing cap. Sven's waving at me frantically.

— Can you throw me a mask?

Can't you wait your turn like everyone else?

I feel Gabriel behind me, raising an eyebrow.

- *Gus*?
- Forget it.

I promise you, I didn't blush.

I toss him a mask and a snorkel. He immediately tosses the snorkel back.

— No need. I'm good at free diving.

I toss my own snorkel back onto the pile. I'm good at free diving too, thank you very much.

He dives over the railing. I wait a bit and do the same, just to avoid the ladder.

Naturally, I miss half of the underwater exploration: I'm good at free diving, but I can't hold out for half an hour. I pull Gabriel out of the passage under the rock, and we come back on board too early. This time, Vanella joins us in the shade.

At the third stop, I'm fed up with diving and marveling at the same crystal blue sea I've already seen at every single bay. I'm ready to nap on the return trip, and not even the blaring music can stop me.

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I let out an unholy scream when a freezing can presses against my sunburned skin. Every head turns to me. Sven—how did I remember his first name?—is grinning like an idiot, handing me a beer.

Seriously, what is wrong with you?

— Here, this is for you.

After that rude awakening, what I really need is a coffee, not a watered-down beer.

— Thanks," I mumble, dripping sarcasm.

He's waiting for me to open the can, holding his own out to toast.

- Prosit!

I blink.

- What?

- Don't you say Prosit?
- No. We say "Cheers", we say "Bottoms-up", we say "Salud" when we want to pretend we speak...

  Don't know, actually—some random foreign language—we say a lot of shit but we don't say "Prosit".
  - Are you sure?

Are we really having this conversation?

- When did you get here?
- Wednesday." I refrain from a polite "And you?" but that doesn't stop him from telling me all about it.
- We got here on Friday. Friday evening. Time flies. Rhodes is nice.

— Did you see any of it? I get the impression you've spent all your time by the hotel pool.

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly.

— You're not wrong. Björn wasn't thrilled either; he doesn't like the pool.

So Björn must be one of the twins. I wonder if their parents were just as unimaginative with the other kid.

— Are you sure you don't want to come up on the deck? Your right side is still a bit rare.

He winks—winks!—at me without waiting for an answer and heads back to join his friends.

I take a sip and notice the way Gabriel's watching me, cold and judgmental.

— I thought you didn't know him.

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He's up and getting himself a beer before I can answer.

You came into my life at the start of the new school year. The randomness of our last names put us side by side in the cramped auditorium, where the principal was droning through his usual welcome speech—the same one we'd be forced to listen to for the next three years. From the height I'd gained over the summer, he looked tiny. Tiny and as old as my great-grandfather. He was sweating under the oppressive heat, stopping every now and then to wipe his brow, while teachers moved around in the background, trying to create some semblance of airflow by opening the windows one by one. I was plastered to the back row, wiping my sweaty hands

on my jeans, terrified that for some unfathomable reason, you'd suddenly decide to reach out and grab my hand.

We hadn't spoken. No hello, not even a nod; for all I knew, you hadn't even glanced at me until you had to sit beside me. A few rows ahead, Chloe, your best friend at the time, kept turning around, making exaggerated sighs and eye rolls at you—the kind of silent conversations only best friends have.

And there I was—an outsider. Afraid to move, afraid to even blink too loudly, afraid to do anything that might draw attention to myself. I tried to focus on anything but you: Miss Prudeau, our math teacher and homeroom overlord, waddled up to the podium. She was struggling in that thick tweed suit she always wore, even though she was sweating like a melting candle. Her voice was a low murmur as she

introduced herself, her tiny pink glasses slipping down her nose.

— Think she's trying to lose weight?" I whispered, not even realizing I'd spoken out loud.

You turned and looked at me, your gaze freezing me solid.

It was a joke, I swear it was just a joke. I was just another nervous student, gearing up for a new school with new teachers and new classes. Mostly, though, I was tense because you were sitting right beside me. I couldn't keep my eyes from drifting back to the outline of your blouse, and before I knew it, I was dealing with my first soul-crushing erection. Like my whole soul had been brought to a boil, and if no one turned down the heat soon, I'd spill over the edge.

I glanced at Craig for reassurance, hoping to siphon off some of this emotional overload, but he was half-asleep, arms crossed, eyes barely open. I turned back to Miss Prudeau, trying to latch onto anything—her drooping jowls, the way-too-heavy makeup—your wrist—the pink plastic glasses sliding down her nose, the pearls bouncing on her chest—the soft curve of your neck—her high-collared blouse she would wear every day for the rest of the year—the hint of curves to come under your tight tee-shirt—

— What are you looking at?

My eyes shot up to meet yours, and I felt the boiling pot inside me tip over.

— Nothing, nothing…" I stammered, my voice cracking as it shot up two octaves, sheer panic clawing at me. But you'd already turned back to Chloe, dismissing me with a flick of your hair.

I tried to make myself as small as possible until, mercifully, the principal's torturous speech ended. A hundred students surged for the exit, but I hung back, pretending to fumble with my backpack, just to stay a second longer near you. Maybe you'd glance my way. Maybe you'd say something. But you breezed out of the room without a backward look, disappearing into the hallway.

It's funny you don't remember any of this. You always say I'm making it up, that it didn't happen.

But ask Craig—I pestered him for weeks and weeks, mentioning every time I'd see you at the cafeteria, jumping around with overexcitement when we were

on the same handball team—Craig, who was already flitting from girl to girl, falling in and out of crushes like it was an Olympic sport.

I would have like if you'd at least pretend to remember. To humor me. Instead, you keep insisting that we didn't meet until two years later, at the ski camp. I nearly died when you slid into the seat next to me for the chairlift ride. Where was Craig, anyway?

The chairlift came crawling up slowly. I was going to mess up—trip over my ski poles, sit too early or too late, miss the safety bar, fall flat on my face.

You'd roll your eyes again, share that silent sigh with Chloe, and that would be it. I prayed to every saint, angel, and divine being I could think of, and somehow, miraculously, I managed to sit down gracefully, find the bar, and lower it around both of us.

- Watch your jacket," I said while putting the bar down, voice somehow steady.
  - Oh. Thanks.

You turned your head to gaze at the landscape.

- Edward, right?
- Ed, yes. Eddie. Ed. Yeah.
- You need to pick one. Edward, Ed, or Eddie?

I let you choose, and you smiled—this lopsided smile that was just a little off-center, making my heart skip. We finished the ride in silence. The sun was blinding at the summit.

Later, we shared a hot chocolate, huddled together at a table in the middle of the cafeteria, a million other eyes on us. I could still smell the sweet

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chocolate mixed with the faint scent of your shampoo.

It felt surreal.

— I don't like Miss Prudeau," I blurted out.

You laughed, genuinely this time, like you hadn't expected such a ridiculous comment.

— Me neither.

A pause. I realized that was all I had to offer—small talk about a math teacher. A math teacher I kind of liked, if I was being honest.

Are you coming to the party tonight?" you asked suddenly.

I almost knocked my cup over in my panic.

— Uh... yes? I mean, yes. Are you?

You raised an eyebrow. "Well, I just invited you, didn't I?

That evening, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror at least a hundred times. Changed my shirt a dozen times. Practiced smiling until my cheeks hurt, then cursed myself for looking like an idiot. Where the hell was Craig, anyway?

I could barely breathe when I saw you at the party. You were leaning against the wall, scanning the room like you were bored out of your mind. My stomach twisted into knots. What if you'd forgotten? What if you'd only been joking?

But when our eyes met, you smiled and shifted over, making room for me. Just like that. I don't remember what we talked about. I only remember the dimming lights and reaching out for your hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. You didn't pull away. You turned to me, a question in your gaze.

We danced in silence. My hands were sweaty again, but you didn't seem to notice. We swayed awkwardly, bumping into each other, tripping over our feet. When the lights finally went out completely, I leaned in and kissed you.

— Hey, you two!" a voice broke through the moment.

Miss Prudeau. Our math teacher. The destroyer of our first kiss.

You laughed—a real, joyful laugh—and just because of that laugh, I realized I couldn't hate her any longer.

— It's funny, I didn't peg you as the Sugar Daddy type...

No sooner had Sven climbed back up to the deck than the comments started flying.

— Alright, enough," I mutter, waving them off."He was just trying to make conversation.

Further "witty" remarks are held off thanks to the DJ leaping a decade ahead, straight into the current century, and suddenly, everyone's dancing, both inside the cabin and on the deck. Through the window, I see butts of all shapes and sizes shaking, almost in rhythm. Foghorns blare as we navigate back

into the port, and my stomach decides to chime in, too.

- Didn't she say lunch was included?" I ask, glancing at Gabriel and Vanella, who exchange a quick smile.
- You'll have more room for tonight,"he replies,
   then winks at me.

Pretty sure winking was grounds for the death penalty.

We disembark with the help of some surprisingly agile sailors—compared to our half drunk selves—and by some miracle, we even manage to locate the bus. Gabriel and Vanella don't hesitate to hop on—I guess the idea of taking a walk got lost somewhere along the way—and our overly cheerful group

invades the hotel with all the grace of a herd of slightly tipsy buffalo.

Within minutes, the lounge chairs are creaking under heavy bodies, the bar is slammed, and the once-tranquil pool is now overflowing with noise. I'm pretty sure the poor souls who were enjoying a peaceful morning are probably rethinking all their life choices right now.

- So? How was it?" Stelios asks as he sets down the three beers I just ordered.
- Not bad, I guess. A bit short. Got anything to eat around here?
- They didn't feed you?" Stelios shakes his head, looking outraged. "We tell them every time, it's not cool. You should file a complaint.

That doesn't really answer my question, does it?

I sigh and turn around—and there they are. The Three Blonds. Because where else would they be?
Right in my way, of course.

I slow down, careful not to step in a puddle of water, a stray tube of Nivea cream, or a flip-flop some idiot left lying around. Sven waves as I approach, and I give a brief nod, balancing three glasses in my hands.

I pause for a moment, squinting at Sven. Wait a second...

— You weren't on the bus this morning! How did you get to the ship?

Sven jumps up like an eager puppy.

— No, we went early. To get the best spots on the deck.

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— I see.			
— Do you play volley	ball?		

- Yes but no, thanks.
- There's only three of us. It's boring with just three.
- There are plenty of guys your age around the pool. I'm sure they'd be happy to join.
- We tried. They're all on their phones, posting pictures of the cruise.
- And I'm not allowed to post my photos on Instagram?" I say, raising an eyebrow. He barely suppresses a laugh.

What, am I too old to be on Instagram now?

— Got any good shots?

 No. I didn't bother everyone by posing on top of a rock while half the island waited to attempt suicide.

He pouts.

— Björn missed all his shots. How do you mess up photos with an iPhone? That's a mystery...

The broad-shouldered guy—Cinemascope—lifts his head from his pillow and flips him off neatly. So, *Cinemascope* is Björn. Got it.

- Go put your beers down and come play volleyball.
  - Told you: no, thanks.

I hurry off before the beer foam settles, or before Gabriel and Vanella become completely dehydrated. They've had time to fall back in love for the fiftieth time today—not that it annoys me to see them making out constantly—and then they announce they're going up to, quote-unquote, "watch a movie."

Great. Now I've got three warm beers all to myself. Fabulous.

— Sven, Björn, Number Three—want a beer?

They don't even bother getting out of the pool. No, *I* have to bring the beers *to them*. Unbelievable.

— The first one who splashes me is going to eat the plastic cup through their nose, got it?

Surprisingly, they don't test me, and I go back to lying down, wondering if the hotel shop sells any books.

Bam. A ball lands right next to me.

— Gus? Can you send it back?

I kick it back to the pool.

It doesn't take five minutes before:

— Gus, please!

Another kick, a bit harder this time.

Two minutes later, it lands *right* on me.

— For fuck's sake, guys, are you doing this on purpose or what?

I get up and give them a somewhat rusty smash serve, aiming to hit one of them in the face so they'll leave me alone.

It's Cinemascope—Björn—who's in my sights. I see him open his mouth wide, watching the ball come straight at him.

The point of the game isn't to swallow the ball, dude. It's to put your hands up and send it back—oh yes! Like that! Damn, I didn't plan for that!

A last-minute bump sends the ball in a perfect arc to land right in Sven's hands, who passes it to the third guy. This time, Cinemascope can't stop the smash that goes right past his right side. Nice one.

— Are you done sulking? Wanna play with us now?

Did I just really fall for it like a rookie?

I end up with 16/9 as my teammate—aka

Number Three. To "balance" the teams, apparently. I
don't quite see how it balances things, but why not.

The important thing is that we trounce them. Poor
Björn struggles to move his bulk in the pool, and

despite Sven's best efforts, he can't cover the whole pool.

It's almost impossible to escape the post-match drink to celebrate our victory. 16/9 announces it's his round, a joke you hear way too often in all-inclusive resorts.

I don't mention the ridiculous nicknames I've given them, by the way. Instead, I try to find some logic behind the twins' names, Björn and Oskar, like there's some rule that says if you name one of them Mary-Kate, the other has to be Ashley. Or if there's a Fred, there better be a George.

They're all at the start of their Gap Year—that surreal concept of taking a break from your studies at twenty or twenty-one to travel the world with

daddy's money, collecting life experiences and STDs like they're limited-edition souvenirs. I'm glad Arnold's never mentioned it to his mother—we wouldn't have gotten away with it.

— And when you're done traveling, what's the plan?" I ask.

They shrug.

- I think I'll go to business school," Sven says without much conviction.
- I want to be an actor," the broad-shouldered one announces.

I nearly choke on my beer. *Cinemascope*—better nickname I couldn't have picked. Custom-made.

— And you, Oskar?

— Business, I guess. Or finance. My girlfriend is studying law; I'd like to find a school close to hers.

I chuckle.

- Your girlfriend?
- We're getting engaged, actually. Next year.

I have a moment of hesitation. A readjustment. I look between Sven and Oskar. Neither of them seems surprised or on the verge of laughing. Apparently, counting your friends' pubic hair by the pool is a perfectly normal social activity for them.

- Congratulations!" I raise my glass to toast and swallow my initial impressions.
- And are there opportunities for actors in Sweden?

- Not much in Sweden, no. I'm more thinking
  Hollywood. I've had small roles in a few short films
  and low-budget movies. My agent says I need to keep
  working on my physique because it's my main asset.
- You seem to be following his advice to the letter. But doesn't he want you to work on your acting skills as well, every once in a while?
- I have two hours every day, every morning.
  Online.

Shit. He's taking it more seriously than I would have thought.

- Online's really changed the world. Since I've been here, I've been thinking that working from home—if your home's on a Greek island—would be totally acceptable.
  - What do you do?

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- Project manager at a gambling company.
- Casinos and all that?
- Online, yeah.
- I've never been to a casino," Sven says, his smile widening.

Not the first time I've heard that. I'm starting to think I should make up a new job just to avoid seeing dollar signs flash in people's eyes every time I mention it.

- It's not as glamorous as people think. My job is to create online environments that our clients get hooked on.
  - Like in a real casino.
- Except we plaster warnings everywhere
   saying gambling is bad, remind you to disconnect

every thirty minutes, and provide help numbers if you feel like you're getting addicted.

- But it's...
- Contradictory, I know, but it's the law. And it gives me even more work because we have to make the legal warnings invisible while still putting them front and center.
  - Again, like in a real casino, right?
- I think so, yeah. But it's been years since I set foot in one.

Three pairs of eyes exchange looks.

— Oh no. No, no, I see where this is going, and the answer is no. We're not playing that game, guys. Besides, you have to be twenty-one to enter a casino, so don't even think about it.

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- We're twenty-two. All three of us.
- With real or fake IDs? Either way, we're not likely to find a casino around here.
- We passed by the Rhodos Casino on our walk to the port this morning. It looks gigantic.
  - Great, but it's still *no*.
- Okay. Too bad. We'll all go together. And since we don't know how to play, we'll lose all our money, and it'll be your fault.
- You're not going anywhere. You're going to do what twenty-year-olds do, go clubbing, bring back a girl or whatever, and leave me out of this. I do *online* gambling. I don't even know if I could still play Blackjack.

- Do we have a deck of cards? Stelios, do you have a deck of cards?
- Stelios, don't listen to them, please. Besides, you need at least two or three decks. One isn't enough; we're not playing War here.

Fifteen seconds.

It takes them *fifteen seconds* to find three decks of cards, shuffle them, and ask me how to deal. I take the stack with a sigh, put on my dealer's cap.

Blackjack is like riding a bike—you never forget how.

— Rule number one: leave your credit cards, wallets, and phones here. Watches too, if they're smart—and if you are, all of it stays put. Rule number two: if you win—which you won't—stop at the first sign your luck's turning. First sign. Rule number three: only play with a dealer you have a good feeling about. Stupid, I know, but it works. At least it worked for me. Sort of. Rule number four: nobody ever makes back their losses. Never. It. Doesn't. Happen. So kiss that two hundred euros you're clutching goodbye, because you're walking out of here empty-handed, got it? And finally, when I say we're leaving, we're leaving—no questions, no drama. And no alcohol.

They all nod with their own variations of, "Yes, Dad," making me realize I should be having this talk with Arnold or Louis, not three random Swedes I've barely known a day.

Still, I make them wear proper pants, shirts, and grown-up shoes (no sneakers), and they end up looking almost presentable.

We get to the casino around six, six-thirty tops. In our minds, the ideal scenario is strolling into a casino, hitting the jackpot, and blowing the newfound fortune at the hottest clubs in New York or Miami by midnight, but I want them to experience the *other* kind of casino exit—the one where you walk out in broad daylight, pockets empty, after watching your last coin vanish down a slot or seeing your chips swept away by a dealer who doesn't even bother to offer a smile.

The Casino of Rhodes looks pretty nice, at least from the outside—built like a medieval fortress, complete with floodlit towers and a valeted entryway. Casinos have changed a lot since my day, and I doubt it's just this one. Everything's so regulated now. It's not just a simple ID check anymore; they practically need an application packet: parents' civil status, proof of residence... By the time they get through it all, I can tell their enthusiasm's already taken a hit.

Inside, I'm thrilled to be disappointed. The first floor is jam-packed with slot machines, each one flanked by an elderly patron feeding in coins with a blank stare, like they're making offerings to the god of small payouts. To say it lacks charm would be generous.

— Do you have any gaming tables?" I ask a suited guy with an earpiece.

He points upstairs.

We climb up a plastic-marble staircase to reach the heart of the action—or what passes for it. Six tables. Six *measly* tables. Two Blackjack, one roulette, a craps table nobody seems to know exists, and two more for a game I've never heard of. The Swedes, on the other hand, look like they've struck gold. Go figure.

A small, dingy room in the back is reserved for poker, where a single table stands with a dealer who looks like he's counting sheep.

Good.

I wanted to disappoint them, and I've nailed it.

They only know how to play Blackjack, so their options are limited.

I watch them take a seat at one of the Blackjack tables while I head to the bar.

- Whiskey and Coke.
- Are you the dad? Nice job," the bartender says, a smirk tugging at his lips.

I'm not sure what he means, so I just nod, pretending I do.

I lean back, drink in hand, and watch them fumble through their first rounds. One card dealt, everyone loses. Another round, Oskar collects his bet, and Björn doubles his. Everyone loses. Blackjack!

Nice! Come on, Sven, show them how it's done!

I get used to their way of hugging each other for any reason—whether they win, lose, or tell a joke. The 'girlfriend' Oskar keeps mentioning feels more like a decoy than a real person. Every laugh they share makes it less believable, but hey, none of my business.

I lose track of the game until Sven comes to sit beside me.

- So?
- I've got forty euros left. I think I'm going to stop here.
  - Good. Proud of you. That earns you a drink.
- Cool! Whiskey-Coke!" he calls out to the bartender.
- Coke for him, whiskey for me," I correct. The bartender chuckles.

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- How are the other two holding up?
- They're muddling through. They pass chips around when one's about to go broke. It seems to be working. For now, at least. But I think Björn's about to run out.

Sure enough, Björn glances at Sven, says something in Swedish, and Sven yells, "Double down!"—like it's the perfect time to risk everything on one card

- What does he have?" I ask.
- How would I know?
- You, idiot!" I shout, leaping out of my seat.

Too late. The card's already down.

Björn explodes. He throws his arms around Sven, plants a kiss on his cheek, then spins Oskar around, shouting all the while.

- You guys are insane...
- I always get lucky when it's for someone else," Sven shrugs.
- That's probably a superpower. Next time I play the lottery, I'm calling you.

I pour a splash of whiskey into his Coke. Not much.

I know it's not any of my business, but I'm curious.

— So... how long have you been—

Sven turns to me, eyes narrowing, calculating.

- Seventeen years, I think. We were neighbors.

  Went to school together. Played soccer together.

  That's how it started, and then...
  - Yeah, but I meant... with Björn...
- Bjeeeuuurrrrn," he corrects, dragging the sound out.
  - Right, sorry. Bjooorrrrn.

Eye roll.

- So. What about him?
- He's your boyfriend, right?

Sven's eyes nearly pop out of his head. Before he can respond, Oskar bypasses the last free stool and drops directly onto his lap.

— I'm broke!" Oskar whines dramatically. "I'm broke, and Björn took my last chips. I've ruined my life, my career, my children's future, my legacy... I should just go die of cholera on a deserted island.

Bit dramatic.

Sven leans in and whispers something in Swedish.

Oskar turns to me, ready to burst out laughing.

— Sorry, Gus. I couldn't not tell him...!

Once he finishes rolling around in his chair, Oskar manages to get a grip.

— Where you're wrong, Gus, is that if Sven had to choose between my brother and me, he'd choose me. You know why? Because I don't need to bulk up—everything's already big, from the start.

He grabs Sven's hand and rubs it against his crotch. They both laugh so hard I think they'll fall off their stools.

Björn glances back at the commotion, completely unfazed.

The bartender, however, is starting to look less amused.

- Guys, keep it down," I warn, eyeing the bouncers.
  - Who cares about them? Come on, let's dance.
  - It's a casino, not a nightclub.
  - Boring!

Oskar saunters over to the table, grabs Björn by the waist, and tries to drag him into a comically bad tango, complete with his own hum-along soundtrack. It doesn't last long. We hit the parking lot in under a minute.

Björn is livid, ranting about how he was just a heartbeat away from tripling his chips. He seems to have missed a few details on Blackjack rules.

We hit the parking lot faster than you can say 'Casino Royale,' Björn still fuming about his supposed streak.

- So, what now?" he grumbles. "Dinner?
- Isn't it a bit late?" asks his twin.
- It's on me," I offer. "You all blew two hundred euros for nothing. I can at least buy you a meal. What do you want, Greek?
  - Pizza!
  - Sushi!

- Tex-Mex!
- Greek it is, then, since we're all in agreement.

We wander down to the port. Restaurants are in no short supply. We choose one like any good tourist does: by picking the one with the best view and the most people.

The view of the three windmills lining the harbor, magnificent at night, the glimmering port, and the two columns that supposedly once held the Colossus of Rhodes are postcard-perfect. I try explaining the legend to the guys, but they don't care, they're too busy trying to decode the menu written in Greek. Good luck with that.

We have a few beers to wash down the gyro.

And a few shots to wash down the beers.

I wake up on the toilet. I've gotten up so many times—beer makes me pee every seven minutes—that at some point, I must've decided it was smarter to just stay put. I always think I'm making smart decisions when I'm drunk.

Neck stiff, toilet seat imprinted on my butt, the first thought that pops into my head is...

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

It's like a black hole has settled in my brain, weighing down my skull like an anvil. I grope around for my backup brain—my phone—to get a sense of

the time, but it's dead, just like me. I try plugging it in, but the damn thing slips right out of my hand and disappears under the nightstand like a bratty child. Fine, stay mad, see if I care.

I stumble over my jeans lying on the floor in a perfect crime-scene outline. I check the pockets—just in case. My wallet's still there, so at least that's something. But there's no paper trail to tell me what happened after the casino. I vaguely remember a restaurant, and even more vaguely, gulping down some shots... and that's where the reel cuts off. It's always the shots that kill me. I should know better by now.

I don't open the curtains, just in case it's daylight already (of course it is) and I crawl back into bed. No matter what I do, the sun finds a way through the smallest gap to shine right into my right eye, like it

always does when you want to stay in bed until the apocalypse finally puts you out of your misery.

Somehow, I manage to drag myself downstairs before the breakfast buffet closes. Today's buffet—or is it tomorrow's? I'm not sure. I've thrown on some shorts, fished my phone out from under the nightstand, shoved it in my pocket along with its charger so we can both recharge together like a happy couple, and stumbled my way down with the firm intention of collapsing in front of a very strong black coffee. Maria gives me a big wave, Stelios lifts my eyelids to check if I'm still alive underneath, decides I'm not, and everyone leaves me alone with my gigantic espresso.

Almost everyone.

- Morning!

— Shhhhhhh.

Sven pulls out a chair that screeches louder in my skull than on the tiles.

- Can't you just lift the damn thing?
- You're not expecting anyone?
- No.

He is definitely one of the "anyones" I am not expecting.

He sets down a plate filled to the brim, a steaming cup of tea, an orange juice, and another plate for the pastries. Then he starts devouring everything in a completely random order.

— Sleep well? You look tired.

Tired. Right. Must be Swedish for 'shitfaced.'

## Domain / WATERLINE / 310

He, on the other hand, looks way too fresh for my liking.

- Where are Chip and Dale?
- Huh?
- The twins.
- Oh! They went for a run. What are you doing today?

I just want to lock myself in the dark and wait for nightfall, preferably with three pairs of sunglasses stacked on top of each other, why?

- Lindos. I am supposed to go to Lindos.
- Oh! That's cool. We wanted to go there too. Is it nice?
  - I'll tell you when I've been.

He attacks his omelet with broad, reckless strokes of his fork. I push my coffee away, my stomach unable to handle another drop.

- What time are you leaving?
- Dunno.

He pauses his omelet massacre to butter half a baguette, cover it with jam, and then hand it to me.

— We had a blast yesterday, didn't we?

I look at the slide of bread that somehow landed in my hand, and put it down on my plate.

- Just... remind me... how did we get back?
- I don't know, man. We left you at the gay bar after you stripped naked and started doing the helicopter with your d—
  - How funny you are, first thing in the morning.

He bursts out laughing and swallows the better half of a croissant in one bite.

— We got back after the Samba Maria. Wasn't that late.

He even remembers the names of the bars.

- You really don't remember any of it?
- Of course I do. Just checking.

A bit of shadow falls over me. I manage to open my eyelids a little more, squinting.

— Are you okay? Did you have a good evening?" asks the shadow.

Why does the entire world suddenly care how I'm doing on mornings like this?

I look up, inch by painful inch, to find Gabriel standing there with two plates piled high and a frown deep enough to leave marks.

- Yeah. I... We just... Anyway. How about you?
- We waited for you. For a long time.
- Huh? Waited for me? For what?
- To go to the restaurant. As agreed. We even talked about it again on the boat, but no, *Mister* prefers to go out with people he *doesn't know*, right?
- Ah, shit! I completely forgot. Was it Sunday yesterday? I'm totally out of sync. And we talked about it again? On the boat? When?
- It's okay, forget it. We thought it would be nice, but clearly, our company isn't... Anyway. Glad you two got acquainted, at last.

And he walks off without another word.

Sven raises an eyebrow, still chewing. "What's with him?

- He must be on his periods.
- I think you broke his little heart," Sven says with a grin.

I lift an eyelid and give him my best death glare.

He laughs out loud and pulls out his phone.

— Go on, make that face again, I've got to capture it for posterity!

I lunge for the phone, but he's quick. He jumps up and snaps another shot, and I forget my knee's still hurting as I chase him around the pool, dodging "No Running" signs and sunbeds trying to trip me up. The manager appears out of nowhere, yelling something

in Greek, and Sven freezes long enough for me to grab him by the waist and pretend to throw him into the water.

— If I go in, you go in too!" he says, holding on to me like his life depends on it.

As if that's going to stop me...

I jump, taking him with me.

We're hanging there.

Suspended.

The water's weightless pull blurs the line between bodies, skin, memory—everything bleeds into everything. I press in, trying to catch something that keeps slipping away. A shiver hits, raw and violent, where touch used to be. The shape of you floods back. That electric charge. I hold tighter,

tighter, until I feel it all slipping through me—scent, warmth, the way I was whole with you, gone. I want to scream. But nothing, no sound. Just the water closing in. And me, sinking dee—

A tug yanks me back.

— Come on, stop playing dead, Gus. The manager's going to have an aneurysm.

The little man's standing there at the pool's edge, arms crossed, tapping his foot impatiently like our school principal.

We make our way to the side.

- I think I got a good one," Sven says, fishing his phone out of his shorts' pocket.
- What an idiot! Why didn't you ditch his phone before jumping in? I totally didn't think—

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He looks at me, puzzled.

— I'll buy you a new one; it's completely my fault.

— Huh? What are you talking about? It's

waterproof." He frowns at me. "Don't tell me yours

isn't?

I look at my poor, sad phone at the bottom of the pool—a small black rectangle tethered to its white cable, like an umbilical cord I didn't even bother to plug in at breakfast.

When I finally fish it out, Sven's gone.

The manager's waiting, arms crossed.

— Got any rice?

He gapes at me, speechless.

# Domain / WATERLINE / 318

— For my phone. What, I'm not going to put it in the dryer, am I?

Ah, Lindos. The famous Lindos. Everyone raves about it. And when you finally get here? Yeah, it's... fine It's blue and white, just like the postcards. The sun's scorching, the water's salty, and the air's so thick it clings to your skin. My T-shirt's soaked through before I even shut the rental car door—heat pressing down like a furnace. But sure, it's worth a look.

Maria managed to dig up an old road map for me, the kind Sven and his buddies would probably have flipped over searching for a USB port. Not that I really need it—every sign on the island screams "Lindos," like it's the only place that exists. Map or no

map, you end up in the same neat little parking lot, where a line of watermelon stands marks the start of the path to the old town. Motor vehicles are strictly forbidden, but that rule doesn't seem to apply to electric scooters darting around like wannabe bulls in a narrow street bullfight.

The maze of narrow alleyways pulls me in, shop to shop, tugging at me like a vortex, along with hundreds of other tourists who are just as lost. Each twist and turn looks the same, and every dead-end is perfectly designed to disorient you until you're not sure if you've already been down this street or if you're retracing your steps. It's all so perfectly arranged, so maddeningly well-planned, that I start to wonder: What happens to people who get stuck here after dark? Does someone come to guide them out?

Do hidden lights flicker on like emergency exit signs, showing the safe path to follow?

The deeper I go—turning, turning, and descending, down, down, and down—the quieter the crowd becomes, until it's just me and a trickle of voices in the distance. The Acropolis signs grow fewer and farther between, almost as if they're testing you, daring you to find your own way out. Just when I think I've lost my chance, a faded sign with a barely visible arrow catches my eye. I seize it, turn right, and—of course—keep turning, turning, turning. But now I'm going up, up, up—each step a little harder, a little steeper. Stone path, then stairs, then gravel trail—each one leading to the next, like a series of clues that finally, finally, lead to the reward at the end: the pièce de résistance of Lindos—the Acropolis.

But the Acropolis isn't for the faint of heart. I attack the first few steps with fresh determination, mocking the people trudging down with sweat-drenched shirts and legs barely holding them up. Really? A few flights and you're already dead on your feet? Maybe try a little cardio now and then so your hearts don't short-circuit at the slightest incline.

After the first flight of stairs—right when the souvenir shops turn into drying racks for embroidered doilies that the locals shove into the suitcases of poor, unsuspecting tourists—my forehead decides to pour sweat, just like that, no warning. Five minutes later, I'm a full-blown Niagara Falls. By the time I reach the top, I'm nothing more than a giant drop of sweat saddled with a backpack. I feel (a little) guilty for all those internal jokes I made about people struggling on their way down. I take a breath, buy a

tiny bottle of water for fifteen million euros, and only then, I let the place hit me.

The Acropolis stands tall, towering over everything. It commands respect. I straighten up, feeling the weight of history settle around me.

Passing through the large gate, I'm suddenly aware of my own smallness, like crossing into another universe. The gate's remains alone hint at the grandeur, the decadence, the splendor that the Acropolis once embodied. I wander between crumbling walls, peer through empty frames that used to be windows, trace my fingers over a sculpture smoothed by time.

Old stones are good for the soul. They remind you of how small you are in the grand scheme of things—how even the weight you carry isn't enough to leave a mark. Not here. And that's comforting, in a

way. These stones have seen centuries pass, empires rise and fall, and here I am, sweating buckets over a few dozen steps. Nothing I do matters to them.

Nothing I've broken, lost, or failed to hold onto will leave a mark here. Might be why people taking photos... That gets under my skin. They pose in front of a stone sculpted two thousand years ago, grinning like they're the ones who dragged it out of the ground. Move along, blockheads, we've seen enough of your faces.

No photos for me, obviously. My phone's in its bowl of rice, contemplating whether to revive or die a hero. But maybe that's for the best. I'm seeing things differently without a screen in front of my face. Raw. Unfiltered. Real. I look as if it's my last chance, as if I'm trying to burn the image into my mind. I'll remember it better that way.

When you look back, what do you really remember? What memories last the longest? Our high school years. Arnold's birth. His baptism. That first Christmas in our old Eastside apartment, the second-hand Ford Taurus. I remember missing Louis's birth because of work. The roses I bought to apologize. Those Sunday afternoons with vinyl records spinning and mugs of hot chocolate. No photos of any of that. Just snapshots that have held on over the years. After that, we started sorting, organizing, classifying everything into hard drives. Order replaced memory.

I take one last look over my shoulder before starting the descent, trying to memorize it all as if it's the last time.

With all these lunatics climbing up, getting down isn't any easier. The staircase feels narrower, tighter on the way back, and we have to squeeze into alcoves

to let streams of people flow past each other without too many head-on collisions. The shopkeepers' corners—usually empty—are now packed. Not with buyers, mind you—just people wedging themselves in to ease the traffic. Just catching a glimpse of shadows stretching around the town's edges makes me breathe a little easier. Maybe there *is* a way out of this maze.

-Gus!

Auditory hallucination. I must be dehydrated.

- Gus! Hey, Gus!

Three blond heads pop out from around a bend.

- What the hell are you guys doing here?
- We're heading up to the Acropolis!
- No shit.

- Is it worth it up there?
- Got water, hats, and a good parasol? 'Cause it's *brutal*. Speaking of which, I need something to drink—I'm running on fumes. Good luck—the climb's a killer.

I finish the last stretch of the steep staircase, empty my savings on two ice-cold bottles of water, and down one in a single gulp.

— Heading back right after?

Sven's hopping from foot to foot behind me, looking like a toddler waiting for someone to show him where the bathroom is.

— What are you doing, not going up? I'm grabbing a bite to eat before heading back—need to get some energy. Why?

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- The AC on the bus was busted.
- Yikes... How long did that take?
- Almost two hours," he replies, shifting uncomfortably
  - Ahh, so *that's* where the smell's coming from.

He shuffles back a step, and I watch him hesitate before sniffing his armpits.

- Relax, I'm messing with you.
- So... since you're here...

As if I didn't see that one coming.

- You guys better get a move on. I'm not hanging around here forever waiting.
  - Can we call you when we're done?

I tilt my head, giving him a second to realize.

— Oh, right... Forgot your phone did the Titanic.

The twins, still lagging behind, join in.

- Come up with us, Gus! We can take a picture of you," suggests Oskar.
- Nah, thanks, guys. I've already conquered the north face once, not doing it again.
- Classic grandpa excuse!" Björn calls out, turning around.

I drain the second bottle dry.

— Hey, Björn, do you do a lot of squats?

He whips his head back, suddenly all ears.

— Tuesday's leg day, why?

I lunge forward, planting a foot on the first step, just ahead of him.

- 'Cause you're gonna need strong legs if you wanna keep up! Last one to the top buys the round!
  - You're cheating! Hey! Gus! What the...

Better save your breath, kid—you'll need it...

It doesn't take him long to catch up, elbowing his way past me like I'm a cardboard cutout, nearly knocking a family of tourists off the ledge. I try kicking it up a gear; he mirrors me step-for-step, springing up two at a time, relentless. I might as well be climbing in slow motion—every second he pulls further ahead, and the summit's still nowhere in sight. But I've got a ready-made excuse: my knee.

I'm about to wave the white flag when I see him falter. No more bounding up steps like a sprinter.

He's down to a cautious one-at-a-time crawl. Then half a step. Then... nothing.

— Now or never, Eddie...

I go for it, lungs burning, legs screaming. He's clutching his side, totally gassed. I breeze by and, two strides later, I'm alone on the track, heading for glory. A few elderly folks shuffle down, and I nod them a polite "after you" before crossing the imaginary finish line, arms raised like I just conquered the marathon.

Okay, I collapse in a heap two seconds later, barely able to breathe. My lungs scream, my knee's throbbing, but hey—victory's victory.

— So, what do you think of that, kid?

Björn finally crests the last step, face beet-red, looking like he's ready to pass out.

— I'm starting cardio as soon as we get back. I swear.

- Yeah, right. Not happening.
- Yeah, no, probably not. But hey, it's the thought that counts.

I drape a sweaty arm over his shoulder. Poor guy's struggling just to stay upright. We find a patch of shade and flop down to wait for the other two.

To kill time, I give him the watered-down version of what I learned on my first visit, back when I still bothered to read the plaques and "educate" myself.

All I get are a few indifferent "Mhm"s and "Okay"s, if I'm lucky.

I hate awkward silences. That's why I'm always throwing out some random comment or coming up with dumb questions.

— If you could replace any actor in any movie, who would it be? — Charlton Heston. Ben-Hur, 1959.

Wow. He didn't even blink. Must be one of those standard questions they get at auditions.

— And you?

I tip my head back, feign a deep-thought expression.

- No clue. Not exactly gunning to be an actor.
- But you could be.

I'll take it as a compliment.

— Have you always wanted to be one?

Strangely, that's the question that makes him think.

- No. Wanted to be a cop, a firefighter, a vet, a stuntman, a banker, a baker, an architect, an interior decorator, a politician...
  - So, why an actor?
- Because I can be all of the above in one life. I get to live and die dozens of times, know every detail of their habits, their dreams, their fears—without having to actually *be* any of them for more than a few months. It's like picking a candy blindfolded out of a huge jar. No clue what you'll get, but you know it's going to be sweet while it lasts.
  - Never really thought about acting in that way.
- Yeah, well, you're not exactly *gunning to be an actor*, either.

He flashes me a grin, throwing my own line back at me.

It takes a surprising amount of courage to get back up after Oskar and Sven finally show up, sunburned and eager, and to do the whole tour of the ruins all over again. Strangely enough, not much has changed since my first visit.

They insist on snapping pictures of me in front of a half-standing staircase, then the gate (yes, yes—I know I look like a clueless tourist posing in front of a landmark), all so I can't refuse to return the favor. I end up playing photographer for the rest of the visit—a role I could easily live without.

On our way back down, we do what every good tourist does: stop at the first taverna we stumble across. Of course it's a bad idea, everyone knows it, yet somehow, everyone does it. We order a half-liter of orange juice with four straws and about fifteen jugs of water, and then fall silent, staring at a menu that

manages to be complicated in its simplicity. Simple because the choices are blissfully limited to three starters, three mains, and three desserts (a sure sign the ingredients are fresh—good sign). Complicated because not a single dish description gives the slightest hint of what you'll get. I read the menu three times, even attempt to read it in Greek to see if that'll shed any light (of course not), and look up to see three equally clueless faces staring back at me.

We all drop our gaze when the waiter shows up to take our order.

— You know what," I tell him, "everything looks so good, we can't decide. Bring us your personal favorites. What *you'd* choose if you were sitting at this table.

The guys nod along eagerly, closing their menus with a collective sigh of relief, and the waiter jots down our non-order on his pad.

In perfect synchronization, three phones emerge from three pockets. We scroll through the Acropolis photos, picking which ones will end up on Instagram, debating hashtags, and liking and commenting on everything our friends have posted.

— Want to log in?" Sven asks, holding out his phone.

A pretty blonde girl beams at me from his lock screen.

- Who's that?
- Evy. My girlfriend.
- I didn't know you had a girlfriend.

- Yeah, you thought I was sleeping with Björn.
- Björn's head snaps up.
- Excuse me?

I don't know which of us blushes harder. I try to kick Sven under the table, but he dodges it like a pro.

— 7-4-8-5-9-6," he says, smirking. "That's my password. In case you want to log in. Not that it's my fault you thought diving into the pool with your phone was a brilliant idea, but hey, we can't leave you completely cut off from the virtual world, can we?

I push his phone back. I'm connected to reality just fine as it is, and getting back online would only invite trouble—a flood of angry messages from you. Or worse, from Arnold.

Arnold.

Damn.

The agency.

I really need to call them as soon as we get back.

Our conversation trails off when our waiter returns, laying out a feast that's more banquet than meal: saffron calamari, spinach and feta pie, bone marrow that's somehow both delicious and hideous to look at, fish, shrimp, avocado, grapefruit—I lose track. It's an abundance that makes yesterday's pitiful gyro seem like a distant memory. The boys offer up their digital thanks, snapping pictures and bowing down to the Instagram gods for blessing them with this masterpiece they'll soon share with the world.

The plates empty faster than our stomachs can handle.

— Dessert on the rooftop?" asks our server.

I don't even get the chance to say "Just the bill, please" before three eager "Yes!" responses fill the air.

We're led up a tiny staircase—smaller even than the one to the Acropolis—and by the third step, the heat is already pressing down like a suffocating blanket.

It would've been foolish to refuse. Of course, the desserts are delicious, but the view... the view is what's truly breathtaking.

I've heard a lot about Lindos. And, like I said earlier, when you first arrive, it's beautiful. Cute little winding streets clinging to the mountainside, cobblestone paths echoing with the imagined footsteps of long-gone Olympian gods, that beloved patchwork of white and blue. From ground level,

Lindos is a quaint Greek village, made all the more charming by the ancient ruins that guard it like old sentries.

But from up here, Lindos is dressed in colors that don't exist. The walls you thought were white unravel into a palette caught between the shimmering halos of sea foam and the gilded dust that escapes from a child's dream. The rocks glitter as if studded with gems from another planet, polished by the shouts of gods who lost their temper and the fleeting light of a star that never quite reached its destination. The city casts its reflection into the transparent sky, bringing to life the blush of pinks and the soft ochres that timidly surface here and there, waiting for the sunset to call them forth for their twilight parade. You hear the centuries laboring to preserve its magic, the relentless years that try to chip away at it. You hear

the city suffer and see it fight back, defying fate, refusing to become just another page in the history books.

Lindos isn't just beautiful, or magnificent, or splendid. Lindos is the spark in Zeus's eye when Hera steps into view.

We barely touch the desserts. The guys try to reorient themselves, to pull free from this moment, but even they can't tear themselves away from the embrace of this view.

— What's your code again?" I ask Sven, holding out my hand.

He smiles, passes me his phone.

Craig needs to see this.

## Domain / WATERLINE / 343

Hell, I even want *you* to see this.

Going for a swim was never part of the plan. We were clear on that. We'd grab a bite to eat, and I'd gently send them back to their hotel—a pat on the back, and off to bed. Nothing could make me change my mind.

Nothing, except slipping into the shoes of a Greek god, looking down from the rooftop of the world, and letting myself get lost in the wonders offered to blindeyed mortals. From this terrace, where the slow, hazy hours stretched out into something almost unreal, you could hear the city hum like a distant siren's song, the kind no sailor can resist.

A casual, "Fancy a swim, guys?" was all it took for us to fall under its spell.

You always say I don't know how to relax. When I go to the sea, it's to swim—to that rock way out there, until land is just a dot on the horizon. It's not to sit on a towel, waiting for it to be time to leave. And you—you're there for the beach, not the water. The idea of dipping in just to see if the water's warm enough for you gets less appealing as the years go by. You say someone has to watch the bags, but look around, every couple's in the water, and not a single bag goes missing. The world's a little more civilized than we give it credit for.

But as I drift in Aphrodite's turquoise bed, I forget all that. I forget the need to push myself until

my muscles ache and my head's empty. Forget wanting to break some kind of record, any record. I let myself drift on the silky waves of an afternoon that feels like it'll last forever. Not a word, not a sound—just the beat of my heart, fading away to crash against the shore's white-pebble beach.

The boys get out before I do. Björn's the only one who remembers where the sharp rocks are scarce, while Oskar and Sven tiptoe around, cursing under his breath in Swedish. They lay their big towels out close to each other and, as usual, pile themselves together like puppies, enjoying the warmth of bodies rather than the harshness of the pebbles. This closeness, this freedom they have with each other, doesn't surprise me as much now; it's as natural to them as it's foreign to me. Even in my oldest memories, when we went on vacation with cousins,

we'd have died rather than putting our towels less than six feet apart.

By the time I join them, they're already asleep. I don't know how they do it; I've never been able to sleep on a beach. Maybe it's a parent thing. When we started going to the beach with Arnold, then Louis, we were on high alert every single second. The beach was the place where we had to be most attentive. Every sound, every scream would have us leaping out of our chairs. That slight undercurrent of stress never really left me.

I dig out my own not-so-cozy nest between the pebbles, spread out a too-thin towel, and lay down, eyes shut tight against the sun. My lids aren't even fully closed before a foot calmly settles on my stomach.

- Get your foot off me, Sven.
- The pebbles are scorching.
- They are for me, too, but I'm not sprawling out on the guy next to me.

I can almost feel the guy beside me raise his head, probably worried to find himself in the middle of a conversation he didn't sign up for. Sven's foot doesn't budge.

- You're hairy.
- Don't be jealous. You'll hit puberty, someday.

I hear him smile, pressing his foot harder into my ribs.

- What were you like at our age?
- A real pain in the ass, just like you guys.

It's a good question, though. A fair one. How would I have seen the twenty-something-year-old Ed if I'd run into him on the street? Would I have stopped at the facade I worked so hard to maintain—the young man who thought he was steering life, not being pushed by it? Or would I have seen through the already-thick shell of a kid full of doubts, wishing an absent father would show up once in a while to reassure and comfort him?

- I'd already had my first real job by your age.

  And I'm not talking about handing out flyers or
  babysitting—no, a real job in a real company. My wife
  was pregnant, and we were about to get married.
  - What, you didn't wait for marriage before...?
- Of course we waited, just another immaculate conception," I say with an exaggerated grin.

He laughs softly. Good audience.

- Evy, she wants to wait. She thinks we're still too young.
  - Wait for what, exactly?

This time he bursts out laughing. The other two stir, groaning for him to let them sleep.

- To have a kid! Believe me, it's a bit late for the Immaculate Conception.
  - Alright, alright, spare me the details.
- It's funny. With Evy, it feels like we've been together forever.

I force myself to respond. "The important thing is that you're happy."

Other responses flit through my head. Some of them draw on my own experience, wanting to remind

him it might not be enough to *stay* together forever. Or suggest that, no matter how it ends, they could have two beautiful kids, a great adventure, and twenty years later, if asked if he'd sign the registry again, despite everything, he'd say yes, again, again, and always. Because the good parts were totally worth it.

- It would help if Björn found someone.
- Björn? Why?
- Oskar has Mina; I have Evy; he's alone.

  Always alone. I think we're all just waiting for him to find someone so that we can—I'm going to say something stupid, but so that we can be a family. You know, a family of the heart. So we can all get together for Christmas, not just the three of us, because we don't want him to feel out of place.

- What makes you think it would make him uncomfortable? Maybe he's perfectly fine with it, and you're the one projecting things.
- We tried. We went away for a weekend, all five of us. He pretends, and he's good at it, but you can see he's uncomfortable. It's funny; he's the one of the three of us I can most imagine with kids. He'd be an amazing dad. As strict as can be, but a super dad.
- It's not as easy as it looks, being a father. I'm not even talking about being a super dad. Figuring out when your kid needs you and when to let them get bruised so they can grow—that's already complicated enough.
  - How many do you have?
  - Two. She... She wanted three.

I'd forgotten that. I'd forgotten you'd asked me if we'd want a third. A girl, maybe, if we were lucky.

God. I told you it wasn't the right time, that I was on the verge of changing jobs (I was always on the verge of changing jobs back then), and you let me decide.

You left it up to me. And I let it slip.

Forgot it all.

Completely blanked on that conversation. I can't even tell you how much I regret it now. That's when it all started, isn't it? You waited—you waited so long. You were patient. You left the door open for me to come back to it. But I never did.

- What are their names?
- Louis and Arnold. Arnold and Louis, actually.
   In order of appearance.

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— I always wanted to name my first son
Wolfgang.
— Bad idea.
— Yeah, I know. Got over it. <i>Gus</i> sounds good,
though.
I roll onto my side, propped up on my elbow.
— My name's actually Ed. Edward. Not Gus.
— I know.
I scoff.
— You know?
— Maria. She called you by your name when you
were getting your card renewed or something.
— Eavesdropping, now, are we?
He smiles, then pops up on one elbow.

— Oh! You thought I said I wanted to name him Gus because of *you*? Oh, no, no, not at all!

I make a mock swipe at his head, but he's quick. He catches my wrist, I grab his other hand, and I take a knee to the gut as he tries to break free. Don't get cocky, kid, I've still got some fight left. We roll, shove, grapple, and toss each other around, groaning when the pebbles dig into our shoulders or hips, like two kids with nothing better to do than see who's stronger. We eventually collapse against Oskar and Björn, both of us out of breath. I'm half-sprawled on him, him on me, us on them. Björn is surprisingly comfortable. Less bony than the other two. Guess building muscle has its perks.

— Smile for the camera!

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Sven stretches his arm out, trying to fit all of us as he can into the tiny screen. I strike a cool pose—though I probably just look like an old guy pretending there's still a bit of rock 'n' roll left in his bones.

As soon as they get out of the car, they head straight for the pool, eager to catch the last rays of sunlight. I leave them to it, feeling like I've soaked up more than enough UV rays for one day. I slip into the elevator, which groans and shudders like it's dragging itself up to the third floor by sheer willpower.

I collapse onto the bed. My phone sits on the nightstand, still buried in its rice coffin, waiting for me to take the gamble and see if its impromptu swim had been fatal. Just the thought of the flood of notifications makes me question whether I even want it to have survived.

I turn on the TV and land on a rerun of *Friends*.

No subtitles needed—the jokes are etched into my brain, almost like muscle memory.

As soon as the credits roll, Steve Jobs' posthumous symphony starts to play, *molto allegro*. Beeps, dings, tweets, pings, rings—every digital annoyance known to man competes for my attention. And, sad to say, they succeed.

Does it even matter whether I start with work emails or personal ones? Either way, I know what's waiting for me. Work first, then: updates from colleagues on the new checkout version that's supposed to bump up our conversion rate by a solid 0.3%. Some fishing for information. A newbie developer already asking for a raise (seriously?). Then, onto my personal inbox—a junkyard of ads, spam, and scams. All those "Nigerian uncles" and

emails from "the government" claiming they need my bank details for a refund. One day, personal email accounts will go the way of landlines—used only by your mom and scammers. And scammers pretending to be your mom.

Oh. And then there's one from you, too.

I skim through it once, quickly.

Then I read it again.

And again, trying to make sense of a single damn word. All those "Have you thought about the kids?" and "What will the neighbors say?"—none of it computes.

You, who usually send emails barely longer than a tweet, have somehow managed to send a novel's worth of accusations that don't fit together: you claim I blocked you on WhatsApp (what?), ignored your

texts (what texts?), and stopped answering your calls. In short, you're accusing me of erasing you from my life and turning you into some sort of pariah. You always exaggerate everything. Being mad at me for not dealing with Arnold's apartment, I get. But you know what? Arnold pisses me off. He only comes to me when he needs something. I'm not asking for much, but a call or a text on my birthday wouldn't kill him. You get cards; he calls you the day before, the day of, the day after. Sends gifts. I'd be happy with a single text, that's all. The call to the agency that I never made? It's not some Freudian thing. I just didn't want to do it. I don't want to do it. As long as he's in that little student room, he needs us. Once he's got his own place, I know exactly what'll happen: we'll see him once a year, on Mother's Day or Christmas. And even then, only if we invite ourselves

over. I know what it's like when your kid turns his back on you. But you? You're in for a surprise.

You know what I really would like? With Arnold, I would like us, once, just once, on a summer evening, to share a glass of rosé on the deck and talk about anything and everything—without it ending in a shouting match. That would make me happy. And I think it would make you happy, too.

The *Star Wars* theme fills the serene void of the hotel room.

- Hey, Craig. Sorry, man, I wanted to call you back, but things got a bit... hectic. How are you holding up?
- Damn, I'm exhausted. She wore me out. For four days, we've been going through the tourist guide

page by page, visiting every monument, every ugly stone, one by one, every park, every... She gives me detailed accounts of the economic-political impact of rivers that flow through towns I can't even remember. She's going to kill me, man. My brain is about to jump off a bridge without a parachute. I can't wait to get back—you have no idea. And not just so you can explain what the hell's going on at your place, because I've lost track, but just to drop her off at home and veg out in front of Netflix, watching *Love is* Blond or Whatever. (I hear him smirk, god knows why.) I need to stop pretending I care about all these things she's telling me. Even though, of course, it's interesting... in small doses. Like everything. Sorry. So, how's Gus? Did you take him out of the closet? I mean, him and everything else...

I feel my cheeks flush. How does he even know about that? That's baffles me.

- Oh, yeah, that... Just... Coincidence, I don't know... I don't know where it came from. Anyway.
- Are you talking about Gus or your taste for blond hunks?

My throat goes dry.

- My what?
- Well, it was a good try. You've never had so many likes and comments on your profile. Vince had a field day; I nearly pissed myself reading his last comment. Did you see it?

The more he laughs, the paler I get.

— Craig, what are you talking about?

The panic in my voice almost stops his laughter.

— The photo you posted. I know it's not what it looks like—I know you better than that—but in terms of homoeroticism, you couldn't have done better. You must have known it would get a reaction from everyone. A couple of well-placed hashtags, and you would've had twelve million followers, by now...

I pull the phone away from my ear, open
Instagram, and stare in complete bewilderment at a
photo of four intertwined bodies, glistening with
sweat, skin against skin, looking at the camera. One of
these bodies looks very much like mine.

- What the hell is this doing on my profile?
- It's all good, Ed, I'm just teasing you. I know you didn't just have an orgy with some random hunks. At least I hope so, because you always told me

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that if you ever turned gay, it'd be with me, and I'm not ready to cross that bridge yet.

- Did I... When did I say that?
- We all say dumb things when we're drunk.What language is that, anyway? The caption?

I swipe under the photo.

— It's in...

I look at the picture again, the caption... That's when it clicks.

— It's in *fucking Swedish!* 

I hang up without saying goodbye and jump out of bed. What would the kids think? Suddenly, your email makes perfect sense. I don't give a damn about the neighbors, but the kids... Especially Arnold. Louis

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would find it hilarious. He's probably already left some lewd comment. But Arnold...

I bolt down the stairs on shaky legs.

He's by the pool, feet dangling in the water, watching the birds.

I grab him by the arm and yank him up. He lets out a cry of surprise. Did I hurt him? Maybe, but I don't care. The twins freeze in the middle of the pool, staring at us. I feel eyes turning toward us, and I force myself to take a deep breath, to shove the lid back on my anger before it boils over.

— What...

I lower my voice.

— What the hell were you thinking? Are you absofuckingly mental?

He narrows his eyes. Not because of the sun.

— Answer me, for fuck's sake! Why did you do that? Seriously, I thought we were... I don't know, I thought there was some sort of trust? No? What the hell do you get out of... Damn it, Sven! Do you have any idea the shit I'm in?

Judging by his reaction—or lack thereof—no, he doesn't. Not at all. I shove my phone—and the beach picture—in his face.

— My wife saw this! My friends saw this! The whole damn world saw this!

He cups his hands to shield his eyes from the sun and looks at the photo.

— But I didn't even tag you. How could...

He looks as stunned as I was. I feel like an idiot, holding my phone right in his face.

And then, suddenly, his eyes go wide.

- Oh, shit...
- Yeah, exactly: oh, shit!

He grabs his phone, trying to stifle a laugh.

- I'm still logged into your account, aren't I? From when you signed in on the rooftop?
  - Bingo, Sherlock.
- No wonder I got so few likes! I couldn't figure it out!
- That's not the damn problem, Sven! It looks like we just had wild sex in that photo and you posted it on my account! My boss follows me, my kids follow

me, my friends—hell, my *lawyer* might follow me, for all I know!

— You've got, like, one hundred and twenty-nine followers. It's not the end of the world. At least you got a few new ones thanks to me. (*Ding*). And look, there's another one... You really need to learn how to build your own brand!

I want to smack him, throw him into the pool, hold his head underwater, ground him for half his life. Instead, I feel a twitch at the corner of my lips. And I start laughing as if it's actually funny.

There are two more dings from our phones.

Craig's left a new comment: three • emojis.

— Ha ha ha, very funny."

I reply with a 😌 emoji.

- You know you can delete it.
- I know.

I slip my phone back in my pocket.

Since we split up, this is the first time you've shown me a bit of attention. A spark of jealousy. I'm not letting that pass by.

- You have to maintain the suspense sometimes.
- At least your friends will think you're a bit less uptight than you actually are, which isn't a bad thing.
  - Uptight? You think I'm uptight?

He raises his eyebrows incredulously.

- It's not a big deal. Plenty of uptight people survive almost symptom-free.
  - I'm the complete opposite of uptight.

He smirks. It's infuriating.

- Forget it. It was just an offhand comment.
- There are no offhand comments. Go on, tell me why you think I'm uptight.
  - It's just... It's nothing. I'm telling you, forget it.
- I'm uptight because I don't want to show myself naked on the internet surrounded by three young guys? Is that what you call being uptight? Well then, why don't we take some photos of *you* rummaging through your friends' underwear and post those on Instagram too, while we're at it?
  - You're being a pain, Eddie.
- Yeah, I'm uptight and a pain. Damn, one wonders why you like hanging out with me so much. Oh yeah, *I have a car*.

He gives me that contemptuous look—one I'm too familiar with, thanks to Arnold.

God, I hate that look.

- Sorry. Sorry, Sven. I'm just a bit on edge.
- No shit.

He sits at the edge of the pool, playing with the water with his feet. I sit down beside him.

I could explain that I'm in the middle of a breakup, that my head's a mess, that he shouldn't take it personally. I could tell him—again—how I managed to screw up my marriage all on my own, but it wouldn't help anyone. Not even me.

He slides into the water, smiling.

- Come on.
- I'm fully dressed.

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— You see what I mean? You really are uptight!" he calls as he swims away.

The manager yells when I jump into the pool, clothes and all.

I crack open the patio door, letting in the sounds of the world outside to mingle with the shadows of my dreams. It's a mess of noises that clash and blur together—the scraping of chairs on the terrace tiles mixed with the waves crashing in my head, bursts of laughter jabbing at my skull like splinters of glass. I slam the door shut, and the noise dies out.

If I wait any longer, I'll miss dinner. Not that it matters—afternoon naps always kill my appetite.

I start tidying up the room instead. Straightening things up helps me focus, or so I tell myself. I toss an empty vodka bottle in the trash, open a fresh one while I wonder what you're doing right now. I hang up my shirts, trying to imagine what book you're reading. I slide my shoes under the closet and wonder what—or who—you might be thinking about. If you worry about me while I straighten the towels, pour a glass, put away my shoes. Why would you. I wonder if you miss me at all. I wonder if you're okay. And then I catch myself hoping you're not. That would make two of us.

I almost called Magaly earlier—can you believe that? At the time, it felt logical. Cold. Calculated. I have so many questions and she might have some answers. Not the ones I want to hear, but any answer is better than going in circles with the same questions tightening like a noose. Magaly, with or without that damn "Y" at the end, she knows everything, doesn't

she? Everything you told her, everything you twisted and warped to fit your version of our unraveled marriage. Maybe I need to hear it one day, if we're ever going to lay it all bare and move forward. But right no, I'm a goldfish in a bowl. I can't breathe, can't move, just want to jump overboard—even if jumping means flopping around on the cold, hard ground until it finally stops.

I need it to stop.

I need to stop seeing your shadow in every corner, hearing your voice in every conversation.

I need to stop reaching for your hand or opening my mouth to say something, only to remember you're not there. I wait until night swallows the last bit of daylight and the bottle's empty before heading downstairs.

I take the stairs—don't want to risk seeing my own reflection in the elevator. I go straight to the bar. I'll refuse the drink Stelios offers, of course, but he won't listen. It'll be his fault if I drink too much, not mine. I'll let him do the talking this time, while I sit there amidst the half-cleared tables, napkins fluttering in the breeze like butterflies with broken wings.

Maria goes silent as soon as I approach.

— Hey, we were just talking about you—Stelios and I. Did you eat outside tonight?

She sounds friendly, but there's something different in her eyes.

I nod, even though it's not true. Easier that way.

- Are you okay? You seem a little...
- Took a nap," I say, like that explains everything.

She nods sympathetically, and I swap her company for that of a barstool.

Stelios asks what I want.

*Peace*, I want to say. Instead, he drowns it in a shot of yodka.

— You skipped my quiz, tonight," he says, like I let him down.

I take a long gulp of vodka, letting him ramble on. That's the plan anyway—let him do the talking. Which he does.

— Are you even listening to me?

No, not really.

— What did you do to him, then?

I blink, confused.

- I'm talking about Gabriel. Jeez, am I talking to myself here? He hasn't stopped ranting about you all evening—and not in the nicest way. I thought you two were like best buddies.
  - Yeah, he thought so too, apparently.
  - And?
- And nothing. We were supposed to have dinner, I forgot, end of story.

I barely push my glass forward and he's already refilling it.

— From what I heard, you'd think you'd committed high treason. Goes to show, you never really know what's going on in people's heads.

I clink the ice in my glass, watching it swirl.

- Maybe I should be mad because you didn't show up for my quiz," he says, trying to bait me.
  - Who won?" I ask.
  - Do you care?
- Twenty years of marriage taught me how to pretend.

He shakes his head, half-amused.

— The more I get to know you, the more I want to sign up for a life of celibacy, you know that? I'd join a monastery if it didn't mean getting up at dawn.

The Hungarian restaurateur I once was on a cruise with slips quietly onto the stool next to me.

— Luckily, there's Andres to raise the bar, right, Andres? — Have you seen my glasses, Stelios? I can't find them anywhere... I must have left them on the table.

Stelios glances around.

— Doesn't ring a bell, but give me a sec—I'll ask Maria. You were at table 12, as usual?

The Hungarian nods, and Stelios steps away.

I don't have to reach far to grab the bottle he left within arm's length.

- Can I pour you one?" I ask Andres, lifting it up.
- No thank you, Mister Eddie, it's a bit late for me.

I shrug.

You can drop the 'Mister' thing, Andres.There's nothing about me that deserves a 'Mister'.

He replies something softly, but I don't catch it.

Or maybe I just don't want to.

- Do you have some secret, Andres? A magic trick to make a relationship last?
  - Eszter is my third wife.

I burst out laughing and take another long swig.

— Damn, where's Stelios? I can't drink this stuff without ice.

I grimace but take another sip anyway.

— Marriage is like vodka. I'm just missing the ice to make it go down smoother.

I laugh at my own joke, even if it falls flat. I reach for the bottle again.

— Don't do that, Ed, please.

Stelios finally reappears, holding a pair of glasses.

— Oh, come on, it's my first drink. And you've been gone forever, you think we're just gonna dry up here for your pleasure?

If he thinks I didn't catch the look he gave Andres...

 — I'll walk you back, Eddie. Stelios is closing up anyway.

Stelios nods gently. Of course he does.

Andres takes me by the elbow. My legs feel like jelly.

- Whoa, whoa, stay with me, Eddie.
- It's fine, I just have pins and needles in my legs, that's all.

He tightens his grip as we make our way through the dimly lit room. Maybe they really are closing up. What time is it, anyway?

— You'll get a good night's sleep, and everything will be back to normal, Eddie, you'll see," he says as he presses the elevator button.

I laugh a bit too loudly.

- For the last forty-seven nights, since my wife kicked me out, nothing's been normal. I doubt a forty-eighth night will make any difference. And you have to press five to get to the third floor.
  - I know, Eddie.
- Maybe that's the problem. I'm trying to press three to get to the third floor. In my life, I mean.

- That's right, Eddie. That's right. Do you have cold water in your room? It always helps to drink water before bed.
- I'm not drunk, Andres, I swear," I say just as the elevator dings. "I'm not drunk, I'm just...
  - Unhappy?

I think for a second.

- Disappointed. That's it. Disappointed.
- Maybe you're not the only one. Have you thought about her? You think a lot about yourself, Eddie. If I may say. You pay attention to what others do and how it affects you. Maybe it'd be worth looking at how you affect others. Got your room key?
- You're not gonna lecture me about that dinnerI missed, are you? It's just a dinner, for God's sake.

How many times do I have to say it? You're all obsessed with it.

- Nobody cares about the dinner, not even Gabriel. I think he just felt... I don't know, rejected, maybe.
- Rejected?" I snort. "You wanna know what it feels like to be rejected? I've got a PhD in that. I could give you a whole seminar whenever you want.
- I'm sure you're a good person deep down, Eddie. As for this 'Gus' person, though, I'm not so sure.

He's still saying something when I slam the door in his face, cutting him off before his microwave-ready moral lessons can finish heating up.

I try to ignore the growling in my stomach and the dull headache creeping in as I lace up my sneakers. Hallway, elevator, lobby. Craig's voice slips into my head—Routine's gonna make you old before your time, man. He rarely gets under my skin, but when he said that, it hit a nerve. Just because I stick to the same route for my morning jogs, just because we end up at Flaherty's drinking the same brand of whiskey—it doesn't mean my life's some pointless series of repeated actions. Hallway, elevator, lobby—this isn't routine, Craig, it's just how we get from A to B. I'm not about to take a detour through the hotel next door just to "spice things up".

- Kalimera!" Maria's voice rings out from the breakfast room. "Give me a second, I'll clear a table for you!
  - Don't bother, Maria.

She glances back into the dining area, then turns to me with a conspiratorial smile.

— Oh, no trouble at all. Let me just add a setting.

Before I can protest, she's already walking away.

A few tables down, Gabriel suddenly drops his gaze to his plate.

Shit.

I abandon the idea of going for a run and take a few hesitant steps toward him. He doesn't look up until I pull out a chair.

— Mind if I join?

— It's a free country.

He scoots over as Maria returns with a placemat and utensils wrapped neatly in a paper sleeve.

- Vanella's not with you?
- Brilliant deduction.

My stomach, in as foul a mood as Gabriel, lets out a low growl at the sight of his perfectly grilled sausage. I stare at my empty plate.

A steaming cup of coffee lands in front of me. I glance up, ready to thank Maria, but it's Vanella standing over me.

- I thought—
- You *think* a lot, Eddie," Gabriel cuts in.

If I had a dime for every time I've heard that...

Vanella scrapes her chair against the tile, Gabriel sighs as he shuffles his personal buffet to make room for her, and the silence that follows is so thick it makes the crunch of her cereal sound deafening.

I take a long, slow breath. Not the first time I've had to apologize without knowing exactly what for.

- Gabriel, I...
- Go get yourself something to eat. Don't just sit there watching us like an idiot.

I hesitate, glancing at Vanella. She raises a hand, silently telling me to leave her out of it.

I take my time. Queue up at the buffet, let the eager ones go ahead. Pick out a chocolate croissant with more caution than a surgeon choosing a scalpel, contemplate which candied fruit goes best with Greek yogurt, then finally rejoin them.

— Any idea who won the quiz last night?" I ask, unfolding my napkin onto my lap.

Vanella shovels another spoonful of cereal,

Gabriel takes his sweet time chewing. He clears his throat.

— That couple who always wear matching swimsuits.

I nod solemnly.

— That's a weird habit," he continues. "Can't imagine myself dressed like Vanella.

I try not to smile.

— Not even with that gold bikini she was wearing yesterday?

A smile flickers across his lips.

- Pretty sure they cheated, anyway. They spend half their time scrolling through TikToks, and suddenly they know everything about the Los Angeles Olympics of God-knows-when.
- Maybe they watch documentaries about the Olympics. We can't know for sure.

He gives me a long look over imaginary glasses.

- What's the plan for today?" I ask, biting into my croissant. "I've been meaning to go to the Butterfly Valley for three days now. Might finally make it this time.
  - Is it any good?
- According to their website, yeah. But then again, the last season of *Game of Thrones* was 'spectacular,' according HBO's website.

- What a disaster... If it had been a movie, I would've walked out halfway through. Totally killed any interest I had in watching the new spinoff.
  - Prequel.
  - Yeah, that.
  - So? Butterfly Valley—what do you think?

We both turn to Vanella, who's been listening to our exchange, wide-eyed.

— Sweetheart? What do you think?" Gabriel asks.

She looks back and forth between us, jaw slightly slack, as if I'd just suggested robbing a bank. Finally, she leans back in her chair and crosses her arms.

— Are you serious? Is this how you guys deal with problems? A reference to *Game of Thrones*, a

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couple of lame jokes, and it's all water under the bridge?

- Oh, come on, babe, let's not make a big deal out of it...
- Not a big deal? Are you kidding me, babe?

  You threw a tantrum last night that could've filled an entire cheese platter, and suddenly it's history? Not even *a word* about what's really going on? And you're surprised our relationship's in shambles?

His munching suddenly stops.

- Our relationship? What do you mean? Is there something wr
  - Not now, Gabriel. Not now.

She drains her coffee and jumps to her feet.

— I'm heading up. I'm late for yoga.

With a sharp flick of her hips, she shoves the chair back and storms off.

- Does that mean *yes*, you think?" Gabriel asks, staring after her.
- If I understood women at all, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

He laughs briefly, then pushes his silverware away. I play with the remains of my omelet.

- I'm sorry, Gabriel. About the dinner. I just... I messed up.
- Don't worry about it. It was just one of those wrong-place, wrong-time things. You couldn't have known.
  - Known what?

He folds his paper napkin with far too much precision.

Let's go. Don't want to miss her yoga session.
 Watching her contort herself is the closest thing I get to exercise these days.

We wait for the elevator in silence. The screen above the closed doors reads 4, and I wonder if that floor even exists or if it's just lost forever.

— I lost my brother. Not recently—when I was a kid. He...

He clears his throat several times.

— He... hung himself.

His hand flutters around his neck mechanically, and my stomach twists.

- Vanella keeps telling me to see a shrink. Says I've got some abandonment issues or something. But what's the point? It's not gonna bring him back.
  - I'm sorry," I murmur.
- Some days, it just hits me. Harder than usual. I don't know why.

Every instinct tells me to say something comforting, or something stupid, anything that won't help either of us. I bite my tongue instead.

The numbers on the screen start counting down in a strangely logical order. A soft *ding*, and the elevator doors slide open.

A second *ding*, and they close a few seconds later. We're still on the same landing.

— My wife wanted me to see a shrink, too," I confess. "Kept asking me to go.

Gabriel is still staring at the empty space in front of him. I nudge him gently with my elbow.

— Aren't you curious why?

He takes a deep, wet breath.

— Let me think. Surely it can't be because you refuse to admit you're getting old, because you drink like a fish, because you're obsessive about everything, or because you're pathologically attached to your routine, so, no, I really can't see why she'd suggest that...

I gape at him, speechless.

— Wow. I really need to introduce you to Mathilda. She'd love you.

Craig kept checking every ten seconds to make sure the ring box was still in his pocket.

- That's the best way to lose them, Craig. Can you imagine how ridiculous we'd look showing up at the altar without the rings?
- Trust me, I've been practicing for this moment since I was six, so—would you stop squirming like that? I'm never gonna get your damn bow tie straight if you keep moving!
- Maybe it's your Parkinson's making your hands shake.

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- Are you not nervous at all? Because I'm stressed enough for both of us. Jesus, what if she says no?
- Craig! You're supposed to be boosting my morale, not breaking it. I should've asked Vince to be my best man.
- Vince? He'd probably sign in the wrong spot, and bam, you're legally married to him for life. Is that what you want?
  - Stop strangling me! Just—let me do it.
  - Sorry, too muscly. Can't help it.
  - Yeah, sure, whatever.

Were you nervous? Were you full of doubts?

Because I wasn't. The only thing I was worried about

was forgetting my vows, even though I'd repeated them over and over until dawn the night before, until I knew them better than the back of my hand. I'd spent hours crafting that little piece of speech, that declaration that would forever mark the moment before we said yes to each other. You always said I had a knack for making people laugh, that I had too many words for my own good. But when it came to expressing that fire that consumed me, that magnetic pull that had made us what we are—or what we used to be—I struggled to put two sentences together. Craig tried to tweak a few lines here and there, but what does a rugby player know about poetry, right?

He stayed by my side the entire time we waited for your entrance, trembling in his too-tight suit, while I felt like I was drowning in mine. I closed my eyes when the music started. I didn't want to see you coming. I didn't want to see your shadow, your outline forming in the distance. I wanted all of you, all at once, entirely and completely mine.

— What are you doing, Eddie? Eddie! Open your—

I opened my eyes, and there you were, stunning, wrapped in your bridal meringue. I've always loved meringues, but this one—I wanted to devour it on the spot. A shiver ran down my spine; I wanted to shout, "Yes, I do!" before the priest even had a chance to ask. Say yes, and run away with you right there and then.

The laughter and applause echoed louder in my head than in the church, I'm sure of it. Confetti, rice, and rose petals rained down on us, a comforting shower we braved as we stepped out onto the church steps, hand in hand, more in love than we'd ever been.

Chloe was there, wasn't she? I think I glimpsed her for a second. I thought she'd be your maid of honor—it made perfect sense, just like no one but Craig could've stood by my side that day. I didn't know there was tension between you two, that your late-night conversations had reached a breaking point and that Mary-Ann would be the one signing the registry alongside you.

We led the procession to the reception hall, horns blaring and car alarms shrieking. In that cacophony, in that chaos, there was only us—hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, smile against smile.

Your mom kissed me a million times and whispered, "Take care of her", gripping my hand too tight. She looked incredible—she almost stole the show. Craig spent the night crying into my shoulder, trying to give his speech but never making it past the first four lines, which we all knew by heart by the end of the evening. You leaned over and gently tapped my knee.

— I think it's time...

My throat tightened.

I knew everything about you, just like you knew everything about me. We'd made love for what felt like a lifetime, but this time would be different. It would be the first time I'd make love to my wife. As much as I knew every curve and hollow of your body, I was terrified that something might go wrong.

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You laughed—you laughed as you kissed me, the same laugh that took me back years ago, when Miss Prudeau ruined our first kiss, and I knew, I knew in that instant, that nothing could ever go wrong.

I find a quiet spot, far from the city lights and the noise of the nearby bars. The sand is still warm beneath me as I sit down, take a deep breath, and press the call button. A shiver runs through me when I hear your voice.

— Can you explain what took you so long?Actually, no, I'd rather not know.

Breathe, Eddie. Just breathe.

— How are you?" I ask, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

- Do you know how many calls I've received asking if *you're* okay? Wondering if we were just on vacation at some cousin's place or something?
  - We need to talk, Mathilda.
- Talk? But that's all you do, Eddie. From morning till night. You talk and talk about your life, and it exhausts me.
  - We need to talk about us.

Silence.

- We'll talk when you get back.
- No. I want to talk now. If you think it's been easy living with you all these years, well... you're right. It's been easy because we know each other inside out and because we both wanted it to work. A relationship, it's about—

— I don't have time for this right now, Edward.

We'll talk when you get back. Just call the agency and see what you can do for Arnold. I know you're not his biggest fan, but you don't want him ending up homeless, do you?

Your words hit me like a knife in the back.

- Being away... it helped me see things clearly. I know there are things about me that annoy you, and you know there are things about you that get on my nerves too. But that's normal, that's how it is in every couple. We managed to live with it for twenty years—we can't let it poison us now. We'll find a solution. I want to find a solution. Do you?
  - We'll talk when you get back.
- Damn it, just say yes or no. Don't leave me hanging like an idiot on wet sand in the middle of the

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night, with strangers passing by and staring at me like I'm a lunatic.

- I don't know, Edward. I don't know. That's the only answer I have for you.
  - It's not a no.
  - It's not a yes, either.

I run a hand over my face, trying to swallow the bitterness.

- You should take this time to enjoy yourself,while you're there. Make the most of your vacation.
- Enjoy? Oh, I'm very much enjoying it. I went to the Valley of the Butterflies today with Gabriel and Vanella. You would have loved it, it was—
  - That's not what I meant.

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Of course it's not. I take a breath, my chest feels tighter than ever.

- Are *you* enjoying yourself?
- We'll talk when you get back.
- The record's stuck, Mathilda.

I hear you fighting off a snappy comment.

- Call Arnold. He's worried.
- Arnold?" I grit my teeth. "He's starting to—

I bite my lip to stop the words from spilling out.

- So, should I plan to stay at a hotel when I'm back, or am I allowed to step foot in the house to do a load of laundry?
  - That's something else we'll need to discuss.

It takes every ounce of restraint not to hang up on you then and there. Change the subject. Talk about something else, don't end on this note. Show some interest in her life. You always say I don't ask enough about you.

- Did you get any orders today?
- It's August, Edward. Everyone's on vacation. Well, almost everyone. Magaly's gone to Greece too, actually. Athens, I think.
  - Great, I'll just drop by and say hi. Can't wait.
  - Spare me your sarcasm.

I stretch out on the cool sand, staring up at the stars. I can hear you getting impatient.

— There's just one thing I want to say, Mathilda.

Before it all turns ugly. Thank you. For all the good

made, all the love we gave each other and shared. I don't know if I'll have the guts to say it face-to-face, so... there it is. You gave me twenty years I wouldn't trade for anything. Even the tough times, they gave the good ones their shine. So I'll keep those, too. Do you remember our song? 'The Last Waltz'? I fell in love with you... the last waltz should last forever...'

- I have to go.
- Okay," I say.

But it's not okay. Not even close.

- I'll call you tomorrow.
- I won't be at home.

The line does dead.

— Bye," I say to myself.

Bye.

Bye, bye, bye.

I bury my face in my arms, and the last waltz plays on quietly, just for me.

It's all over now, nothing left to say

Just my tears and the orchestra playing...

The walk back to the hotel feels endless.

The paella night is in full swing.

I think Sven catches sight of me as I slip through the lobby. I turn away.

I climb up to my room, draw the curtains, switch off my phone, put away my laptop, and crawl under

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the sheets with less desire to sleep than during the worst of my insomnia bouts.

— What are	you	writing?
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I snap my notebook shut.

- Nothing.
- You looked pretty focused for someone writing nothing. Can I read it?
  - No. What do you want, Sven?
  - Oskar and I were thinking about renting bikes.
- Fantastic. You have my blessing, my children.

  May the Almighty shield you from the horrors of this world. And vice versa.
  - Don't you want to come with us?

- No. I have things—
- Things to *not* write?
- Exactly.

He nods slowly, like he's trying to convince himself. I wait for him to take the hint and leave, but instead, he pulls out a chair and plops down in front of me.

— Did you see Stelios? Looks like something's up with him.

I glance over my shoulder, looking for anything out of the ordinary—

— Sven!

The little brat just snatched the notebook right out of my hands. He squints at my messy handwriting, trying to make sense of it.

- Sven... Give it back.
- Can't read any of this, anyway.
- That's perfect," I say, snatching the notebook back.

Instead of leaving like a normal human being, he sits down.

- Wanna play volleyball?
- You're annoying, Sven.
- But we're bored.
- Bake some banana bread or something. That was all the rage during lockdown—still works, I imagine.
  - You're so lame.

He just sits there, sulking, staring right at me. I try to ignore him—not exactly the easiest thing—and reopen my notebook.

I reread the paragraph he interrupted. The idiot threw me off, and now I've lost my train of thought. I keep my mouth shut, hoping he'll take the hint and—miracle!—it works. He pushes his chair back, dragging his feet like a kid who just got scolded, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders slumped, and walks away. Almost makes me feel bad.

I could've gone to play volleyball with them. We could've rounded up a few new arrivals to form another team. But I'm comfortable here, glued to my chair. For the first time in a decade—no, probably longer—I have no desire to go for a run.

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The peace doesn't last long, though. Ten minutes later, he's back.

- We're bored.
- I know, Sven. You've mentioned it.
- We're heading out. Wanna come?
- You can come and ask me every ten minutes,but odds are you'll keep getting the same answer.
  - But you don't even know where we're going!
  - And I don't care!
- We're going to Faliraki. Can you drive us? It's just fifteen minutes away.
- I'm sure there's a bus that'll take you there. Or taxis. Or, you know, those bikes you wanted to rent ten minutes ago? Perfect for the occasion.

He sighs so deeply I'm afraid he'll pop a lung.

- At least have dinner with us tonight? It's Greek Night.
- Yeah, fine, whatever. Now go, I have grownup stuff to do.
- Yeah, right. You know, *Eddie*, most people give up their diaries around the age of twelve.

The three grumps collect their toys and tools and trudge toward the lobby.

Of course, I could've driven them. I could even wait for their call to pick them up later or pack them some snacks. But I'm not their babysitter. We wouldn't have done this for Louis or Arnold, either. We agreed back then—no coddling. I still believe we were right not to give in to their every whim. They

didn't turn out too bad, did they? At least Louis.

Arnold is... well. You know.

I cross out the paragraph, close the notebook, and put the cap back on my pen.

For some reason, I'd convinced myself that this week would never end. That I'd just stay here, by the pool, forever. That you, and all the paperwork you're undoubtedly piling up for my return, only exist in a world that won't see me coming back.

Four days. I only have four days left.

Enjoy it, you said.

Sure. And not knowing where I stand will definitely help with that.

So I sit there, between the pool and the bar, staring at the horizon like it might hold the answer.

Sipping a beer I don't even want. Envying the couples dozing off on each other, just to feel the other's presence and hear their hearts beat in sync.

We'll make it. Of course we will. You were right—patching things up isn't enough anymore. We need a reset. I need a reset. You fuck someone, I fuck someone, and we both figure out it wasn't even worth the drama because that's not what matters. Sex, by itself, doesn't matter.

I wish it would be as simple as that. But there's the other stuff, there's the trauma. The way my mom would choke back tears when she'd say Dad was coming home late because he had "work" to do. The look on his face when he finally did show up—angry, flushed, pissed at the world.

My aunt wasn't the first, and she sure as hell wasn't the last. She was just one of many. But you know what, Mathilda? You can accuse me of a lot of things, but I never crossed that line. I've thought about it a million times—hell, at the bar the other night, I was this close. But when her friend told me to go to hell, I was almost relieved. At least I didn't have to make that choice and walk out on myself. So yeah, I've thought about it a thousand times, but I never crossed the line my father crossed over and over again.

I'm not him. I'm not my father.

But if it's what it takes, then let's do it. Make the branch snap, so a new one can grow.

— You alright?

Stelios steps out from behind the bar, gathering up stacks of coffee cups and empty glasses littering the terrace tables.

- I'm fine. A bit... I don't know. Restless.
- Go for a run.

I almost tell him that's a good idea. Pure reflex.

— You know, Stelios... I think I don't even like running. I got into it like people start smoking. To pass the time and fit in. To escape. But I don't actually enjoy it. Takes me half an hour to forget that, every time. To convince myself it's what I need.

He stares at me, baffled. His hands too full with a precarious pile of saucers and mugs.

— If you just need to keep busy, I've got a pile of dirty dishes in the back.

I chuckle.

— I'm just saying, trying to be helpful," he says, giving me a cheeky grin. "You know Maria's got a little thing for you, right?

I pretend not to have heard.

— You'd make a cute couple.

Didn't catch that, either.

He tosses his cloth over his shoulder, leans against the bar. Smells like a sermon is coming.

You'll have to bounce back at some point,Eddie. Unless you're planning to stay single forever...

Not a conversation I want to have. Not here, not now. I gulp down the rest of my beer, stuff my notebook into my backpack, and excuse myself.

I need to walk. I need noise, lights, cars weaving in and out. I need to feel my body resonate with the chaos outside. I need pollution and honking. I need Boston.

I wander through the streets of Rhodes without a destination, hoping to shake off the homesickness. I walk too fast, cursing at tourists who stop dead in their tracks to gawk at shop windows or send a text.

I reach the sea.

We always end up at the sea.

In the middle of a roundabout, the statue of Diagoras, held aloft by his two towering sons, stops me in my tracks. He looks right at me. Right through me. He has my father's gaze.

I sit on a bench and stare back at him, which I've never been able to do when he was alive. I peel back a corner of the shroud that's fallen over my childhood memories—his comments and criticisms that I brushed off, his disappointments he never failed to remind me of. I look at him and I tell him how much it hurts. How much having a role model that you don't want to model yourself on is a mindfuck. That I wanted to be proud of him, I wanted to want to be like him, and the more I speak, the more I hear Arnold's voice talking about me to another statue of Diagoras, somewhere else, somewhen else.

I stay there a little longer, my chest both tighter and lighter, watching Diagoras, a monster of bronze and steel, lean on his sons as he prepares to take flight. I promise myself to try again, to try a bit harder. It can't be that complicated to have a

conversation with Arnold. Not that difficult to go and visit Louis. I'll put in a bit more effort, appreciate time spent together without an agenda, without a checklist. Remind them, remind myself, that a sunset isn't just a day coming to an end, it's the promise of a dawn.

I didn't expect to hear,

— Boston Realty Group, Michael speaking, good evening,

when I dialed the number Arnold has practically plastered across every email and message since last week. The polite, disinterested tone cools a few degrees when I introduce myself, like I'm already a known problem he'd rather not deal with.

But it's not like I've had much choice. The message I'd received from Arnold right before calling flashes through my mind:

??????????

Twelve furious question marks. I didn't think punctuation could scream, but somehow Arnold's managed it. No "Dad, did you call?" or "Any updates?" Just pure, wordless fury, as if to say, "How hard is it to pick up a phone and fix one thing?"

Yeah, well, apples don't fall far from the tree.

And that's the part that really stings.

— Yes, yes, I'm familiar with the situation," Michael says, the frost thickening. "I personally handled Mr. Dresner's file.

*Mr. Dresner*. Wow. Nothing like hearing your kid's name in stiff, unfamiliar syllables to remind you of your place.

— We invested a lot of time in this, both he and I, and were—well, let's say disappointed that it fell Domain / WATERLINE / 431

through due to, um, unforeseen circumstances, but I'm sure we can still—

— Are you married, Michael?

The line goes so silent for a second.

- Yes, but I don't see how that's—
- Yeah, me too. Twenty years. To a wonderful woman. Then, two weeks ago, she tells me she wants a divorce. Out of nowhere. No signs, no warnings—just, 'I'm done. We're done. Bye.' So, guess what we've been doing for the past two weeks? Paperwork, lawyers, meetings to discuss who keeps what, splitting bank accounts, custody arrangements for a cat neither of us likes. Hell, I barely know what country I'm in right now.

— Sir, I—

- Look, I don't want to waste your time. I know I let Arnold down. I dropped the ball on this, but you have to understand—it's been chaos. And I need to make it right.
- I understand," he says, cautious but a little more engaged now. "As I was saying, we were disappointed it didn't work out, but I'm sure if we—
- Are you, though?" I cut in, my voice tightening despite my best efforts to keep it even. "Disappointed, I mean? Because I've had my fair share of disappointment recently, and let me tell you, Michael, it's not a pretty sight.

There's a pause—one of those awkward stretches where you can almost see the person on the other end of the line weighing whether it's better to be honest or just nod and agree until the caller hangs up.

— Look, I get it," I continue, trying to calm down.

"I've been all over the place. I messed up—
completely. But I want to sort this out for my son.

You know what I mean? He's pissed at me, and he's
got every right to be, but if we can give this another
shot, I'll make sure everything's squared away.

Deposit first thing tomorrow. Or tonight, if you want
me to wake up my bank manager and drag him out of
bed.

There's a nervous chuckle. "No, tomorrow—tomorrow's fine.

Just like that, he caves. I feel a small surge of satisfaction.

— Thank you, Michael. Really. I'll get it sorted.

I end the call and draft a quick message to Arnold:

You're good. Call Michael tomorrow to confirm.
His reply comes almost instantly:
OK.

Just OK.

Oskar's eyes go wide when he sees the restaurant completely redecorated since lunch. Blue and white tablecloths, ornate tapestries on the walls replicating some famous fresco from a palace or tomb somewhere, and ouzo bottles standing in for carafes. In the corner, a local guitarist strums a chord, tapping his foot to set the beat for what's bound to be a night full of Greece's greatest hits.

— Over here!" shouts Stelios, waving like we're his long-lost family. "I saved you a table, right next to the band!

Perfect. We even get a welcome cocktail—
probably to dull the pain of surviving a night filled
with "Zorba's Dance" on loop.

— What's wrong, Bjorn? Got a stick up your ass?"I quip, watching him squirm in his chair.

It's not particularly funny, but his two sidekicks are practically in hysterics.

- We went to Mandomata today," Oskar says, like that explains everything.
- And Bjorn forgot sunscreen... in a few places.Missed a couple of spots, let's say.

I stare at them, waiting for the punchline.

- And?
- Mandomata," Sven repeats, slowly, as if speaking to a toddler. "The *nudist* beach.

I squint at him, waiting for it to click.

Oh!

— Bjorn! Man, that must hurt like hell. Want a floatie? We can say you've got hemorrhoids—it's classier!

It takes a sharp glare from the lead singer to shut us up about Bjorn's sunburned backside.

The evening rolls on with Greek salads (as if we weren't already drowning in feta and cucumbers), a gyro for main, a mountain of fruits, and an avalanche of baklavas I refuse to resist. For Stelios's sake, we play along as best we can—clapping in rhythm (or close enough), pretending to know some lyrics—except when "Darla-Dirladada" comes on. It's like being back at your cousin's wedding—the one who

invited us last minute after another couple dropped out, and you can't even remember his first name.

— So, you guys having fun?" Stelios beams as he delivers another round of ouzo we didn't order.

I manage a vague, noncommittal smile in response.

— I can't stand these evenings," he whispers conspiratorially. "Don't know how you're still here...

The bastard! Not only is it his fault we got stuck at the table right next to the band, but now he's hinting we're lame for trying to indulge him! The second he turns his back, we bolt—down our ouzo, dodge the cluster of people attempting a sad sirtaki between the tables, and make a beeline for town, as far away as possible from the Demis Roussos wannabes hammering on their bouzoukis.

We meander through souvenir shops, where the boys predictably waste their money on tourist traps: faux leather bracelets, scented soaps for their moms, cheap trinkets for their girlfriends. I linger by the pendant I'd seen a few days before, Vanella's words echoing in my ears. I leave it in the display.

We get lost in the Jewish Quarter—like, genuinely lost—before stumbling back to the main street and collapsing into the nearest bar, Kamelot, right next to the Palace of the Grand Masters. Oskar volunteers to grab four beers while we squeeze into the loudest corner of the place. Bjorn shifts uncomfortably from one cheek to the other and burns through my entire film knowledge in under ten minutes. He's visibly disappointed I can't discuss the

influences of 1930s Hollywood on Pakistani short films from Lahore, but hey, we all have our limits.

The other two, being good wingmen, switch to Swedish, leaving me to contemplate my growing apathy toward the conversation. I start looking around the bar.

Oh.

Hello, you.

Pretty redhead, sideways glance. Nice. I can stay in the shadows; she might mistake me for someone ten years younger.

Bjorn's reached the 1950s in his *History of Cinema* from the Stone Age to Spielberg when I finally tune back in, but I can't follow half of what he's saying between the noise and his accent. Instead, I get caught up playing the "Are you looking at me?—No, I'm not—

Oh, but maybe I am" game with the redhead. It's juvenile. It's pointless. But it's also exactly what I need.

The boys get restless, cutting off Bjorn's cinematic monologue with a quick "Let's head out.

I take my time standing up, making sure the redhead notices, then casually wander past her table, as if by pure chance. The three Swedes watch me from the exit like I've completely lost my mind.

She watches me approach, hair fluffed, pretending to be surprised when I speak.

— We're leaving. My friends know a place that's less... chaotic. If you're interested...

She glances at her friend. "Okay.

Now, I have to manage the boys.

— Look, guys, I need you to play along," I murmur. "Pretend you know a bar nearby and find us somewhere decent.

Three confused faces blink back a collective "Huh?" until she joins us, and suddenly everyone gets the memo.

- This is Sven, Bjorn, Oskar, and I'm Eddie.
- Amelie.
- Lovely name.

The friend's name? No clue, didn't catch it, don't care. We move through the throngs of tourists, my compliments, questions, and jokes flowing on autopilot, straight out of *Eddie's Guide to Flirting*, whose publication run was canceled two decades ago. Amélie laughs a little too loudly, plays with her necklace, tilts her head just right. She's following her

own How to Pretend You Like a Guy's Advances Even
When You Could Do Much Better handbook to a tee.

Here we go.

Let 's make that branch snap real hard.

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Twenty years. Twenty fucking vears of fantasizing, of dreaming about it, and now that I'm here, in her room, the only thing I can think of is: Will I last more than twelve seconds? What's happening in my underwear is closer to a full-blown flood than any innocent, nervous flutter. Half of me is already pressed between her bra and her, teeth sinking into her skin harder than I mean to, my mouth fumbling for the rough sweetness of her nipple while her hand slips into my trousers, pulling a groan from me that sounds like an animal caught in a trap. It shakes me to my core the same groan I heard in the bushes when I—

Twenty. Fucking. Years of Twenty years. fantasizing, of dreaming about it, and now that I'm here, in her room, the only thing I can think is: Will I last more than twelve seconds? What's happening in my underwear isn't a nervous flutter—it's a gigantic flood waiting to happen. Half of me is already jammed between her bra and her skin, my teeth sinking in harder than I mean to, my mouth fumbling for the rough sweetness of her nipple while her hand slips into my trousers. That sound—it's me groaning, like an animal caught in a trap—shakes me to my core, that sound—the same sound I heard in the bushes when I—

#### — Fuck!

I stumble back, half losing my balance.

- You okay? she mumbles, kneeling in front of me, her fingers fumbling with my uncooperative belt.
  - Yeah, yeah, I...

No way I'm telling her what just flashed into my head.

I gently push her hands aside, unbuckle my belt, taking my time to let the electricity of the moment come back. Come on, come on, don't let me down, not now. I close my eyes, try to wipe away the bushes where my dad—*Eddie!*—I hear him scream, calling my name as she pulls my trousers down, scraping my thighs—*Eddie!*—I pathetically hang onto my boxers as long as I can—*Come on*, *Eddie*, *get back here!*—but I'm already gone. Long gone. Drowning in it. And for the big reveal, there's nothing left of me.

I step back. Lean against the wall. I press my eyes until I see white, until the bushes disappear, until that dark spot he left in my memory vanishes.

### — Sorry, I mumble.

Did I really just say that? Did I really *apologize* to the hottest redhead I've ever had a chance with because I couldn't...

### — It's okay, it happens...

No, it doesn't. *No it fucking doesn't.* Not when you've been waiting for this for a million years. Not a single guy I know would have a breakdown right now. Not with the hottest girl in town ready to blow your mind and everything else you can think of, no, it doesn't happen. Even Vince would be rock-hard by now.

- Want some chamomile tea? she asks, going in for the kill.
  - I think I'm gonna go.
  - We can wait a bit if you want.

Wait for what? So we can sip cocoa and watch Netflix?

— I think... I'm gonna go?

I've said that already, haven't I.

I leave. Head low. Tail—well, you get the idea.

The guys must still be at the bar. Where the hell is that bar, anyway? With my luck, I'll pass right in front of them and they'll catch me. Great.

I veer toward the port instead. The beach is safer. Quieter. No jostling crowds like in the old town, just the quiet thrum of the sea. I take my time, no rush to face myself tonight. Away from the lights and noise, I toy with the idea of digging a hole in the sand and burying myself until winter's over. But I don't have the guts to start digging.

The old man at reception waves absently and I nod back. The elevator's taking forever, so I take the stairs.

Too small, too low, too suffocating. That's how the room feels. I fling open the balcony door to breathe.

— Hey!

There's still someone by the pool? At this hour?

- Hey, Gus! It's me!

I lean over the railing to see Sven waving his phone like a maniac, spotlighted by its glow.

— Come down! Come on, just for a minute!

*Go to hell,* I think, but find myself grabbing my key and shutting the door behind me.

The elevator's slower than ever, so I take the stairs again.

- What do you want, Sven? It's late. You should be in bed with your bottle.
  - Sit down.

Like a moron, I obey and perch on his lounge chair.

I wanted to introduce you to my girlfriend.
 Since she's heard so much about you.

Before I can dodge that trap, he's shoved the phone in my hand.

A girl, barely out of her teens, lying in bed, smiles tentatively at me. She seems at least as surprised and embarrassed as I am.

- Hello?
- Uh, hey. Evy, right? Sorry, I didn't think we'd... Anyway. I... Nice to meet you. Yeah, that's what I meant to say. And now, here's the big idiot you're dating.

I think she laughs, but Sven's already grabbed his phone back.

— That was stupid," I grumble, getting up, but he grabs my shorts, and I have to sit back down to keep from mooning the entire pool area. — Wait, Gus! She says we look alike, see?

He pulls me close, our heads touching. The screen lights up with Evy's approving shriek.

— You're an idiot.

Once more, I try to get up, but he's got a grip like a vise. Or I'm just too tired to resist.

— See? At least *he* agrees with me, he, too, thinks I'm an idiot!

He turns to me, as if explaining something profound. "When I say that, Evy says that no, I'm not an idiot, I'm... different.

— Ouch, that stings!

I snatch the phone from him.

— No, Evy, I swear, he's an idiot. Yeah, ok, a different idiot but idiot anyway. Run while you still can—like I should have.

She's good-natured and laughs, and I feel lighter for a moment. They suit each other—young, carefree, clueless about the shit that's going to hit them after twenty years together.

There's some rapid-fire Swedish I don't follow, a few "bye-bye"s and "mwah-mwah"s that don't need translating.

- So? How was it?" Sven asks once he hangs up.
- What?
- The redhead!

No reason to lie.

I lie anyway.

I regale him with a detailed account of every move we didn't make, every moan we didn't utter, every breathless cry we never shouted. Twice.

— And after all that, and you're still hard? Man, you're a super hero.

Three thoughts pop to my head, in the following order:

First: He's right, I'm back in action!

Then: *She's probably not asleep yet.* Would I remember where she's staying?

And finally: Why is his hand on my dick?

Under the moonlight, none of it seems to really matter.

I glance at his him.

— You too, big guy, looks like you're all set, if you hadn't noticed.

I, unlike him, keep however my hands to myself.

- Yeah, I just spoke to my girlfriend, and it's been over two weeks since I... well, since we saw each other.
- Two weeks. Wait till ten years of marriage, you'll learn to tuck it behind your ear and sleep on it.

He rolls his eyes like he's seriously thinking it over.

- I think we'll be the same after ten, or a hundred years of marriage. We're soulmates. Been together three years, and we can't stand being apart.
- You'll have to get used to it if you're heading to the other side of the world for a year.

He folds his arms over his chest, tucking his hands under his armpits.

- I haven't told the guys, but I'm not doing the Gap Year. I'm going back to study. I got accepted into a biomechanics program.
- Biomechanics? But weren't you talking about business school?
  - My dad's in biomechanics.
  - So?
  - So, nothing.

I swallow back the flood of advice that rushes to my tongue, letting it evaporate instead.

— I'm heading up, he suddenly says. The guys must be wondering where I am.

- Yeah. I'm gonna hit the sack too. I need to get some sleep.
  - After all your exploits, he says with a smirk.

Of course he's seen right through my lies, and I don't even care.

- What floor are you on, by the way?
- Third, same as you.
- Didn't notice.

I expect him to say something like, *There's a lot of things you don't notice*, *Eddie*. Probably because that's something you'd say.

We finish climbing the stairs in silence.

I stop at 304, keycard in hand.

— See you tomorrow?

— See you tomorrow.

He gives me a little wave and keeps walking down the hall. Then he turns around just as I'm slipping into my room.

- Ed?
- Yeah?
- I want to be like you when I'm old.

It warms my heart.

If he'd just skipped the *old* bit, it'd have been perfect.

- Sven?
- Uh?
- I'd like to be like you when I'm young.

He laughs.

And I'm left wondering if I was joking.

You know it's bad when you start counting the days. Thursday, Friday, Saturday. That's two full days left—I've already crossed today off the calendar however early in the morning it is.

Everyone seems to be watching me at breakfast, like they all know what happened last night. I get it now, how people slip into paranoia so easily. All it takes is a small thing—a whisper between Andres and his wife behind their napkins, for instance. Are they talking about me? Or that quiet couple at the next table, who haven't said a word all week but suddenly burst into laughter, a sausage pathetically dangling on their fork. Even Stelios avoided making

eye contact when he handed me my coffee, and that's not like him at all.

Maria's hand on my shoulder makes me jump.

— You okay? You seem tense this morning.

Tense? That would've been helpful last night.

- I'm fine. Just woke up on the wrong side of the bed.
- It's going to be a nice day today. A bit cloudy in the afternoon, though. What's on your agenda?
- I was thinking of visiting the Palace of the Grand Masters. We passed it last night on our way to... well, we passed it. It looks magnificent.
  - Yeah. It is.
  - You don't sound convinced.

- No, really, it's worth a look.
- -But?
- No 'but!' I mean it—it's really pretty.

I push my coffee cup away.

— I'm sick of 'pretty.' I need something that'll blast my mind open. If you had the whole day free, what would you do?

She doesn't hesitate:

— Speed boat.

I must look like I've just seen a ghost. Of course, it fits her character—thinking back on that scooter ride—but that's the last thing I was expecting to hear.

— Speed boat," I echo, after recovering from the shock. "Have you done it before?

- A few times, yes. My husband loves it. Just head to the port, you'll see a whole bunch of them waiting to shatter your spine.
- Sounds... delightful. Do you have a recommendation for which one to choose?

If I'm going to have my spine realigned, might as well do it properly.

She steps away to make a quick call to her husband, then comes back with a post-it note scribbled with details.

— Ask for Marco, and say you're coming from Panayiotis—everyone calls him Panos. He'll give you a good deal.

Back to my room, I find my sneakers hiding under the bed like lazy teenagers, grab a pair of sunglasses, and head straight for the port.

Finding Marco proves to be more of a challenge than expected. I ask about him at every stand along the dock. Turns out, he's well-known, yet as elusive as the Loch Ness Monster.

- Nikos sent me," I say when I finally corner him.
  - Nikos? Nikos who?

Beneath his fringe of too-long, too-gray hair, he gives me a suspicious look. His cut-off jean shorts have weathered more storms than they should have, his bare feet are thick with calluses, and his T-shirt is one hole away from becoming a rag. If anyone should be eyeing the other dubiously, it's me.

— Maria's husband, from the Elli Inn. Isn't it
Nikos?
— You mean Panos?
— Right. Panos. That's what I said, right?
— How's Panos doing?
— Great. He's doing just great.
Hell, he could well be six feet under for all I
know.
— So, you want to go for a ride?
— If you have a spot in the afternoon, sure.
— How many?
— Just me.
— I've got one seat left at five.

Nothing earlier? I heard the evening might be cloudy.

Whatever "cloudy" means in a place that doesn't seem to grasp the concept of clouds.

He pouts.

— No. We're full. Unless you want to rent the whole boat, and then we can go right now. It's twenty dollars.

I pull out my wallet, hopeful.

- Twenty dollars per seat. It's a ten-seater. You do the math.
- Two hundred? Two hundred bucks for ten minutes of bouncing on the waves?
- Let's say one eighty. Because you came from Nikos.

- Thought you didn't know a Nikos?
- Never said that.
- And tomorrow?
- Tomorrow's another day.

So much for helpful.

- What if there's four of us? That's eighty bucks.Better than nothing, right?
  - Sure. Plus, the six empty seats.
- Okay, let's round it up to a hundred bucks and call it a deal. We'll be ready in thirty minutes.

I pull out five bills, holding them out until my arm cramps. Marco just stares, hands buried deep in his pockets.

— Twenty-five. We leave in twenty-five minutes.

— Deal.

He doesn't shake on it but reluctantly takes the money.

All right, now I just have to pry the boys out of bed.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm banging on the door of 317. Two neighbors have time to step out and ask me to keep it down before Sven's pillow-creased face finally appears in the doorway.

- What's going on?" he mutters, still half in a dream.
- Get dressed, we're going speed boating. You have—" (I glance at my watch) "—eighteen minutes, exactly.

A pair of groans rise from under the comforter on the big bed. Definitely not enthusiastic ones.

— Come on, guys, I already paid, so you're not bailing on me now. Let's go! Up and at 'em!

I yank the comforter off in one swift motion, the way I do with Arnold when he can't get out of bed.

That always pisses him off...

The twins couldn't care less.

— No, thanks," they say in unison.

They roll over and bury their faces deeper into their pillows.

Behind me, Sven has managed to slip back into bed, unnoticed.

— Sven! Up! We've got fifteen minutes, boys, move it!

Opening the curtains? Now, that's mean. Even I would have strangled the idiot who'd pull that on me.

— I'm counting to three.

Björn shoots me a death glare but doesn't budge.

— One.

I toss each of them a pair of shorts and a T-shirt lying on the floor.

— Two.

A pair of flip-flops land on the bed.

— Two and a half... okay, you leave me no choice.

At three, I yank the curtains wide open and get the same shock of light as them. I think one of the twins tries to throw a shoe at me. — You'll brush your teeth when we get back.
Right now, we've got to move!

I shove them out of the room, herd them into the elevator, and pack them into the car. Don't ask me how, but we're nearly on time.

— You're late.

I said *nearly* on time.

He waves us on board anyway. I bring up the rear, making sure no one slips away and sneaks back to dreamland.

— They yours? They look like you. Especially the scrawny one.

Thanks, Marco. Too kind.

Strapped in from head to toe, we're ready for takeoff. Engine rumbling, lights on, and... And

puttering along like a toy boat until we're far enough from shore, clear of swimmers, rocks, and anything that might pose a threat.

— We need to get out of the harbor," Marco shouts over the reluctant whine of the engine, which, like the boys, clearly wishes it were still asleep.

Just a slight shift of the lever, and suddenly it's like someone's dropped a hammer on our chests. I cling to my harness for dear life as the boat takes off, the boys finally wide awake, and all of us screaming our lungs out as we shoot across the water at warp speed. I glance at them—blond hair whipping in the wind, smiles stretching from ear to ear, hands up in the air as if trying to catch hold of time itself.

— Come on, Gus! Let loose!" Oskar yells over the roar of the engines.

My hands, welded to the straps of my harness, pretend not to hear.

I don't think of myself as a coward—just reasonable. Like a forty-year-old man. And it's boring being reasonable. I finally let go of the damn harness, and you know what? It feels so good, that rush of adrenaline whipping through your veins. That slight doubt that creeps in when you know there's a risk, no matter how small, that Marco might lose control, or we could crash into a rock. That at any moment, everything could end. And you haven't seen it all yet. It's like a blunt saber pressed against your chest, whispering, Realize this, buddy—one wrong move, and I win. You had your chance, but it's over. Done. Game over.

Sven takes my hand and holds it up to keep me from retreating to the comfort of the harness cutting into my shoulders and crotch. Just a bunch of idiots

yelling their heads off for no reason other than to finally let out that part of ourselves we keep hidden too often. That almost animalistic part that lies dormant within us—there's a term for it in psychology, you told me a hundred times, but I can't remember it. All those stories about the id and the superego... they've always gone over my head.

With each turn, my heart seems to lag behind, trailing after me on a bungee cord, struggling to keep pace as the minutes blur together, until I can't decide whether I want Marco to kick it up a notch or stop the boat right now so I can leap off and swim back to shore.

By the time we return to the port, my stomach's in my heels. Physically. Organ relocation on fast-forward. I fumble with the harness, unsteady hands barely managing to unclip it, and stagger onto solid

ground like I've just been through a rollercoaster. At least I'm not the only one wobbling like a drunk sailor—that's something. The boys are jabbering away in a flurry of disjointed comments, completely lost in their own world of Swedish. Can't blame them. My brain's still playing Scrabble, trying to spit out words made of consonants only.

— Breakfast?" Björn suggests.

I don't have time to say, No way—I'll never be able to eat again before the turn of the century before they're already settled at a table.

They clear out half the café's fridge. And I help them, my stomach having finally decided to return to its rightful place and resume its duties.

- He could've dropped us off at the beach. Would've saved time," Oskar mutters between mouthfuls.
  - Going back to the bare-ass beach today?
- Yeah. It's pretty chill there. We can play football without bothering anyone, play music, no one says anything, it's cool. You wanna come?
  - You need a ride, is that it?

They bury their faces in their plates to avoid answering.

- Can you keep your swimming trunks on, or is it strict-strict?
- I'm telling you, it's cool. Do whatever you want. No one's going to give you a hard time. You

could show up in a wetsuit if you're afraid to show your arm hair, no one cares.

— It's not the... never mind. I still need to swing by the hotel, grab my towel, sunscreen... wouldn't want to end up like some people...

Still too touchy of a subject for Björn to laugh, apparently. It'll come, with time and persistence.

We have one last coffee before heading off, steps more confident.

— It was really nice, Ed. Thanks.

I respond to Sven with a wink.

I should've taken my usual shortcut instead of cutting through the pool area, bumping into half the hotel's population, doing the *Hey, how's it going? Yes,* 

I'm good too. Oh yes, great weather, you're right. No, unbelievable. Have a nice day! routine over and over, but I wanted to swing by the hotel shop and buy one of those swimsuits I hate—wearing a Speedo on a nudist beach seemed weirdly vulgar.

— Ed!

Shit.

- Hey, Gabriel, what's up?
- What're you up to?
- I...

I'm about to go full monty on a nudist beach, how about you? would've been a perfectly valid response.

— Nothing special. And you?

Arms loaded with beach towels, bottles of water, fruits swiped from the breakfast buffet, books, and

Vanella, I should've known better than to ask a dumb question.

— We're heading to Elli Beach. You wanna come?

I stammer out some lame excuse—Calls, work, there's a crisis, it's not pretty, regulations, whatever.

- It always hits when you're on vacation, huh?Dinner tonight? You can't bail on us this time.
- Can we do it tomorrow instead? Andres has been pestering me to have dinner with him.

Apparently, he needs my opinion on his business. I can't see how I can help unless he wants to turn his restaurant tables into roulette tables, but I've already told him no three times. I don't really have a choice.

- We're leaving tomorrow, early afternoon.
- Tomorrow? You moved your flight up?

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Vanella and Gabriel exchange a quick glance.

- Uh... no.
- But it's Thursday. You're not leaving until Saturday, the day after tomorrow.

Another glance. The kind I really don't like.

— It's Friday, Ed. We're leaving tomorrow.

Tomorrow—Saturday.

I look for a wall to lean against.

— Ed? You okay, Eddie?

I never realized how terrified I was—I am—of time slipping through my fingers. It's not just about miscalculating the days, or even the shadows of everything I've been trying to shove aside creeping back up on me, no—it's about opportunities lost forever. What would I have done with that lost day? Who might I have met? Could something big, something unfathomable, have pushed my life in a direction I never even thought possible? Or pushed it back toward the path I was hoping for when I was 20? When we were 20?Where we thought we'd be.

Because we're not there, are we? And worse, I can't even remember *where* we wanted to be. Life ran

right over me, over us. I wonder—would one more day have changed anything?

I keep thinking about what you said to me once, half-joking: You waste time trying to save it.

If you only knew how right you were.

My head's heavy, legs still shaky, as I find Sven and the others sprawled on the hood of the car, roasting in the sun while waiting for me.

- You took your sweet time!
- Wry chuckle.
- Who's driving? I don't feel like it.

Björn ends up taking the wheel. I claim the passenger seat—long legs, old age privileges—and press my forehead against the window, watching the

landscape blur past. Mostly, it's scraggly bushes scorched by the sun, struggling to cling to the dry, barren ground.

Björn signals carefully, turns onto a narrow road off the almost-highway, then onto a dirt path. He parks at the end of a long line of cars.

— We have to head down from here.

Oskar and Sven have already leapt out and are sprinting down a steep path.

— Or we could... take the other way, Björn says, tossing me the keys.

To the left, a winding trail meanders gently down toward the northern edge of the beach. I follow him, more inclined to stretch my legs than to end up as a human Big Mac at the bottom of the cliff.

From where we are, the beach looks enormous. Three neat clusters of white and blue lounge chairs, all perfectly lined up under matching umbrellas, cover most of the sand. A snack bar waits eagerly for lunchtime, and there's a bit too much exposed flesh shuffling between the sea, the loungers, and the bar. Instinctively, I avert my gaze. Further off, where Oskar and Sven will hopefully land if they don't tumble down head over heels, a secluded spot with more rocks than sunbeds offers the tranquility I'm looking for.

- Is nudism part of Swedish culture? I ask.
- *Was*. Not so much now. We spend less time in saunas than we let people think. It's become more of a tourist thing. A trademark, like crispbread or salty

licorice. We need something to stand out; otherwise, all they remember is our four hours of sunlight in winter.

Even on our quieter path, we have to watch out for loose gravel eager to send us skidding. I glance toward the daredevils to see if they're still upright, but there's no sign of them. Well, as long as there are no white flags or distress flares, I'll assume they're still in the race.

— Sorry, Björn. I jumped to conclusions about you and Sven.....

He lets a small laugh scatter over the pebbles.

— You're not the first. But no. *Unfortunately*, no.

Björn glances sideways at me, gauging my reaction. My gaping mouth makes him smile sadly.

- He doesn't know, and it's better that way. It wouldn't work anyway. For a lot of reasons. My career, for one.
- Your career? What are you talking about?

  Björn, come on, the entertainment world is filled with all sorts now—don't tell me it could be a hindrance, it's practically the opposite!
- You have no idea. The image projected on screens and what happens behind the scenes are two different worlds. You can't be gay in the film industry. Not in the beginning. Once you're famous, once you fill seats and top the box office, then they become a bit more tolerant. No, no, that's not even true. They turn a blind eye, that's all. It's obvious that a big chunk of actors are gay—nothing new there—yet you'd still struggle to name one who hasn't either seen his career crash or been typecast into gay roles

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until he's too old to take his shirt off. That's not what I want. I want to have fun in my job, not get pigeonholed as the guy who plays guys who like guys because I'm a guy who likes guys. That's not acting; that's exhibitionism.

— Just...

I bite my lip.

- What?
- Just be careful not to waste your time being someone you're not. You won't get it back.

He smiles kindly.

I know I wouldn't have understood either.

The boys are already in the water by the time we join them. I pull out my newly purchased swim

trunks from a plastic bag, then change my mind and strip down, like everyone else. See, Sven, not so uptight after all, huh? Björn keeps his shorts on to avoid another UV disaster, and we scramble over the rocks that guard their turquoise paradise with jagged edges. Instead of slipping into my usual measured crawl, I let myself float on my back, eyes closed, carried by the salt-heavy water.

Maybe this is what you meant when you told me to enjoy it. I let myself hope that's what you meant.

The boys, true to form, are sprawled out side by side, snoring under the sun by the time I decide to get out. I lay my towel a little distance away and lie down.

— Wanna play football?

I pretend not to hear. Pretend to be asleep, deaf, something like that.

A foot nudges my ribs.

- Gus, wanna play football?
- I'm not playing football in this outfit. Don't want to get an eyeful on a misplaced tackle.
  - Come on...
- I'm trying to rest. You should give it a shot. First step is to close your mouth.

He sighs like a kid denied candy. I think he's finally going to shut up and let me drift off, but...

- How many push-ups can you do?
- I know exactly how many kicks in the ass I'm going to give you if you keep going.

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- Björn, how many? How many push-ups can you do?
  - Eighty, a hundred, depends.
- Let's have a contest. Loser goes to get something to drink, I'm thirsty.
  - I've got water in my bag.
- I'll sit on Björn's shoulders; that'll be his handicap.

Björn and I don't move an inch in perfect synchronisation.

- Come on, guys, seriously, you're no fun.
- How many push-ups can *you* do, Sven? I ask, eyes closed, hands resting on my stomach.

He laughs.

- Me? I don't spend my days at the gym. I can do half-one, on a good day.
- Well then, you lose. You're getting the drinks.Here, take my card if you need it. Diet Coke for me.Go on, hop hop hop!

I can't believe that actually worked.

- Sven! I call after him as he trots off toward the café. Put something on your ass, will you?
  - Okay, Dad.
- Call me "Dad" one more time, and you'll end up with the Titanic's remains.
  - Okay, Dad.

What a little shit!

I leap to my feet and sprint after him, tackling him face-first into the sand. He thrashes around like a madman, but there's no way he's getting the upper hand. No credit to me—he's barely half my weight. I get a hold of him around the waist, sweep his legs out from under him, and he kicks and slaps the air, but all he manages to do is dig his own hole in the sand. I finally pin him down with my full weight, trapping his thigh under mine, wrists buried in the sand, until he has no choice but to admit defeat.

- You done? Out of smart-ass comments?
- Yes, Dad!

I don't know where I find a free hand, but I use it to stuff another handful of sand in his mouth. He laughs so hard I think he's really going to choke, and I let him go. We both lie there on the ground, panting like oxen, him spitting out sand.

- Go get us something to drink, I say, standing up. I need a swim.
  - Think it'll help you cool off?

It's a little too close to the bone to be funny.

Of course, it's got nothing to do with him, nothing to do with me—it's just... it's the intimacy. That closeness I've missed for months. It's not the sex I missed, it was the contact. Skin against skin. Your hand on my stomach, on my chest. Mine, resting against your hip. Those moments when we weren't two people bound by marriage, but one entity, sharing the same energy. Your head on my shoulder. I could've done without the sex, we could've done without the sex, but having you there, just beside me, and not being able to touch you, not being able to

hold you close—that was torture. And it was in my head that this barrier had gone up. It was in my head that you didn't want me to approach you anymore, didn't want me to put my hand on the small of your back, didn't want me to kiss you anymore. It was in my head that you wanted me to keep my distance. And I tried so hard to maintain those distances that it became... what we know.

I don't know if it's the cold water or thinking about all this that does it, but I manage to get out of the sea with my head held high before Sven even reaches the drinks stand.

 Hope he grabs some fries too, I'm starving, I say to Björn.

The look he gives me couldn't care less about fries.

He tries to smile, to reassure me—or him—a smile that tries to say "Don't worry. It'll pass. It always does."

Yes, Björn, it always does.

Until it doesn't.

We end up playing football. Don't ask who won; no one knows. I go for another swim, we play volleyball with the football, we laze on the beach, letting the minutes drown around us without trying to rescue them.

I don't let anyone else drive back. Björn cranks the radio up, and the merry troupe belts out the songs way too loud and way too off-key.

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- I'm having dinner with Gabriel and Vanella tonight, I announce during a break. It's their last night. They're leaving tomorrow.
  - Okay. We're going out afterward?
  - Not me, no.
  - Come on…
  - No, absolutely not, no way, never.

They stomp off to their room, and I to mine.

Quick shower, and I collapse on the bed, sinking into the cool sheets so soft I'm tempted to cancel dinner and stay there for the rest of my life.

The *Star Wars* theme song can't shake my good mood. I hum along until it ends.

I'll call Craig later, once I'm back among the living.

Nobody kept anyone waiting. We're all so punctual that we nearly crash into each other in the hotel lobby. Vanella, as usual, looks like a movie star and Gabriel's holding his own as the supporting act. I'm relieved I bothered Maria and the best part of the staff until they finally found me an iron, so I could give a quick press to my one half decent shirt.

When we make it to the table that they thoughtfully booked, I make a point of sitting with my back to the Swedes. I don't like goodbyes; nobody likes goodbyes, and the last thing I need is those idiots making faces at me or giving me big puppydog eyes, hoping I'll go out with them later.

It's always the conversations you want to be lively and exciting that fall flat. Maybe it's too much pressure, too many expectations, and suddenly everything feels bland, lukewarm. Gabriel and I do our best, but we're just gently lobbing back the dry topics Vanella's fishing out of her dwindling list of conversation starters.

The evening drags on, and nobody suggests a last drink.

— We'll see each other at breakfast, right? Let me give you a hug now, just in case…

And that's it. Done. A hug, a "So nice to have met you", and we turn the page with a slight pang, knowing full well we shouldn't say, "We'll keep in touch", knowing we won't. Vacation friendships are

like cheap souvenirs—once you're back home, they don't quite taste the same.

I can't say I'm surprised to find the three of them sprawled across the lobby couches, noses buried in their phones.

- What the hell are you still doing here? I thought you guys were going out.
  - We were waiting for you.
- I already told you, I'm not going out tonight.

  No chaperone to stop you from doing dumb shit or to act as your taxi.
  - Incorrect.
  - What do you mean, "incorrect"?
  - You just went out.

- I'm heading to my room.
- Which means you went out of it. So, you lied when you said you weren't going out, which means you have no choice—you're coming with us.

I drop onto the couch, shoving them aside to make room. Sven's legs immediately flop over my lap as if that's their natural position.

— My God, Sven, you're such a genius, I say, mussing his hair until he squeals. He's so predictable. No, I repeat, no old man tagging along tonight. Now, get going, I need to get back to my herbal tea and Poirot reruns.

# - Who?

— You bunch of uncultured little brats. Go on, scram! I say, slapping Sven's thighs to get him to stand.

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And as unbelievable as it sounds, he jumps to his feet, and the other two follow like clockwork.

- You actually listen to me now? What is this, the Twilight Zone? A hidden camera show?
- We didn't want to deprive you of your precious twelve hours of sleep.
- Something's off. What's the catch? What's going on?
- Nothing, Sven says. We're tired, too. We're just gonna watch a movie and crash.
  - So you're not going out anymore?
  - Nah. The bars here suck.

Yeah, I do feel a bit guilty—like I've ruined their night.

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We take the stairs. I stop in front of my room, they keep walking.

— Bye!

— Bye.

That's it? Just bye?

Suspicious.

Very suspicious.

Or maybe I'm just looking for an excuse to go out after all. Maybe I want them to push me a little. But they've already moved on and the only one who glances back at me is me. I almost call after them, tell them I've changed my mind, that we could go grab a drink—just one. Maybe two.

But they've already closed their door.

I pull the card key from my pocket, swipe it through the reader, and the lights flood the room a little too brightly.

I'm heading into the bathroom when something catches my eye.

I take a step back.

What the...

No way.

Those bastards!

Lined up on the dresser beneath the large mirror are enough bottles to stock a small bar. Whiskey, vodka, beer, gin, ouzo, even some limoncello—all the alcohol you can think of, standing at attention, waiting for their orders.

I try to work up some anger.

I stride to the door, yank it open, and—of course—come face to face with three grinning blonde heads.

— You guys are such a pain in my ass.

They don't even give me time to move before they're all piling into the room, Bluetooth speaker blaring, arms full of chip bags. One of them even has a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Unlit. For now.

— Björn, you don't even smoke!

They don't care what I say. We've already cracked open half the bottles, and cups fill up faster than we can knock them back..

- How the hell did you get in here? Aren't these rooms supposed to be, you know, somewhat secure?
  - Stelios.

— That bastard's gonna hear from me. Oskar!

Don't drink straight from the bottle! Jesus, how were you raised? Sven, get your damn shoes off the—What the—

A vodka ends up in my hand. I take a swig and nearly spit it right back out.

— Didn't you think to get any ice? Vodka's disgusting when it's warm!

Oskar yanks open the balcony door.

— Room service! Ice!

I grab him by the shirt and toss him back onto the bed.

— Have you lost your mind, shouting like that?
You're all drunk already, aren't you?

From the pool, we hear Stelios yell, "It's coming!" and the three of them dissolve into laughter.

— Okay, listen up: we're having one drink, fine. But if one of you screams like that again, if anyone jumps on the bed, if there's any bullshit that's gonna get me in trouble with the hotel, I'm throwing all three of you in the pool from the balcony, understood?

Their only answer is to down their drinks in one go.

Stelios hasn't even had time to bring the ice before reception is calling. Apparently, our neighbors aren't in the mood to have a little party by proxy. I promise them we'll turn the volume down, of course, I understand, no problem at all.

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Except we only have normal-sized plastic cups.

Drinking games are supposed to be played with shot glasses, not half-liter cups. Every shot is more like half a bottle.

Reception: Would you mind lowering the music? The neighbors are complaining.

Me: *Music? There's no music on,* I shout over Rihanna who's wailing about her *Umbrella-ella-ella*.

Reception: I'm standing outside your door.

Me: Oops.

- Let's play War! Or Kems!
- I don't have cards. And... (I squint, trying to make sense of the blurry numbers on my phone) it's four in the fucking morning.

Four a.m. Christ...

I somehow manage to get up, piece by piece, half-stumbling over a leg or something. The world tilts as I stand, my head heavy, everything rolling and swirling like a slow-motion wreck. Ceiling and floor seem to jump at each other while I'm stuck, bouncing in between.

I'm gonna puke.

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No, I'm not.

Shit, I'm really gonna puke!

— Oskar, move! I need to...

Flush. He's out of the bathroom just in time.

I don't usually throw up, which is probably why I look like hell now.

I keep my head over the toilet for what feels like forever, waiting for the captain to steady the ship.

Closing my eyes makes it worse. Keeping them open?

Even worse. Eventually, I just slump on the cold tile, hoping it'll calm the storm.

There's a knock on the door.

— You okay? Eddie?

I hate when he calls me Eddie. Gus. Gus is good.

— I'm fine. Just fine. I'm... yeah. Fine.

Who am I trying to convince?

His footsteps fade.

I splash cold water on my face, trying to pull myself together. The face staring back at me looks like a startled animal—wide-eyed, dazed. I try to brush my teeth, but it's mostly my gums, my lips, even one nostril that gets most of the attention.

When I finally stumble out, battling the bathroom door lock, the kids are sprawled across my bed like it's a warzone. Half-asleep, half-passed-out. I nearly trip over Björn, who still has that damn cigarette behind his ear. No idea how it stayed there all night.

The room reeks of booze and sweat. I open the balcony door, and the cool air hits me like a slap.

I take a long drag of the cigarette.

And nearly hack up a lung. The smoke burns all the way down, every cough tearing through my chest. Why do we do this again? I wait for the coughing fit to pass and—yeah, I take another drag. Masochist, I know.

## — Hey.

Sven's leaning against the doorframe, the light catching on his shoulders.

— Fuck... I haven't been this drunk since I turned eighteen, I rasp.

He comes up next to me, leaning over the railing.

I hold out the cigarette. He takes it between his thumb
and forefinger like an old-timey gangster, and
grimaces as he takes a small puff. It makes me laugh.

## — You ok?

I wrap an arm around his shoulders, and he melts into me. He takes my other hand, pulling it around him. I let my head fall into the crook of his neck, and we stand there, watching the stars dance in the pool's reflection.

He smells like the sea—salt and sun.

Like alcohol too.

He smells like yesterdays and tomorrows, those sepia-toned summers, campfires just before dawn.

Like the humid air after a storm, leather and pine.

His fingers thread through mine, weaving into those memories, through the salt, the sand, the sweat on his skin, tracing the waves rippling across his stomach. I know the dunes and the valleys, the dips and turns, the fine down that quivers beneath the

waistband. I know the pulse, the shiver, I know the surge that takes over, I know the breath that suffocates. I know the to-and-fro, the maddening tension, I know the touch that overwhelms, the intense and the subtle, I know the grasp, I know the growl, the tremors, the hitch, the quake, I know the burn, the crashing wave, the sharp intake of breath that leaves you gasping, exposed, teetering on the edge, on the brink of collapse.

I know the cold.

I know the absence.

I know the after.

So I hold me tighter, tighter against myself.

I'm chuckling before I'm even awake. Dreams...
They're funny, aren't they?

You once told me that when we dream about someone else, we're really just dreaming about ourselves—but with a mask on, to make it easier to digest. Like the Maalox of messed-up dreams.

Throwing up has its perks. Sure, my skull's throbbing, but looking around the room, I should be moaning and begging for mercy. There are bottles everywhere, cups half-full on the nightstand, the floor, even the bed next to me. Seems like I didn't even bother getting under the sheet—I just fell there

and didn't move for the few hours that night lasted.

My phone's buried in an empty bag of chips, like it tried to escape the carnage but only managed to get greased up and covered in some sticky shit I don't even want to identify.

11:12.

11:12 *a.m.* Thank God for small mercies.

My bladder's an air tanker about to douse a wildfire. I scramble out of bed, trip over a lone shoe—where's the other one?—and make a beeline for the bathroom.

As soon as the pressure eases, the nervous chuckles start again.

I haven't smoked since I was, what, 22? 23? And yet I can still taste that cold, stale tobacco in my mouth. And the dream—poor Sven—playing the role

of some dime-store gangster, pinching the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, channeling his inner Robert De Niro: You talkin' to me? Who the hell else are you talkin' to?

I'm going to need an excavator to clean up this mess. Or, sorry, Craig—a *backhoe* something.

I turn on the tap. The water tastes like crap, but my body doesn't care. Whatever, mate, it says. Just give me something that isn't alcohol.

If I survived last night, I can survive a little Greek tap water.

I pull the curtains—well, the one that is still hanging on its railing—and open the balcony door.

The little table is flipped upside down, chairs are toppled over. A bird even shat on the glass railing—just to complete the masterpiece.

I set the table right, drag one of the chairs upright, and collapse into it. I nudge the ashtray with my foot. It's disgusting. Where di—

Wait.

Did Björn actually smoke that cigarette? The one that spent half the night tucked behind his ear?

That would explain the stupid dream. At least the first part.

My brain made the connection with Sven, and... fuck. I feel uncomfortable even thinking about it.

I need a shower anyway, I'm covered in dried sweat, and it's disgusting. It itches. I can't seem to stop scratching my arms, my legs, even my beard feels like it's having a party. But then, when I scratch the old relic of Gus' mustache, I catch it—cold tobacco on my fingers. And it stops me in my tracks

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Did *I* smoke that cigarette? Is that why my breath reeks of it? Did Sven actually...?

I glance back at the balcony, at the glass railing.

And freeze.

That's no bird shit, on there.

No. Fucking. Way.

I stagger back, heart pounding, pulse in my ears. I blink, hard, I look again, but nothing's changed. The ash is still there. The white smear is still there. Sven's laugh in my ear, his hand on mine. The warmth. The pulse in my fingertips. All I can think of is *shit-fuck-shit-fuck* until the Star Wars theme breaks through the loop and makes me jump.

Craig's name flashes on my phone.

Timing's always been his thing.

- Hey.
- Hey.

His voice is high, almost strangled. Something's wrong. My dream-that-wasn't-that-much-of-a-dream steps back.

— Craig? You okay?

There's a long, dragging silence on the other end.

I hear rustling, like he's trying to pull himself
together. Then, a sharp breath.

— Craig?

A choked sound—half laugh, half sob.

— I thought she was the one, man. I really thought...

I sit down on the edge of the bed.

— Shit... What happened?

Another sob. Then he starts talking—about his latest girlfriend, about some message from her ex that wrecked everything. His words tumble over each other, a rush of pain. My heart tightens in response.

He sounds equally puzzled and relieved that I don't tell him things will get better, that I don't try to take his mind off of it and he is the one eventually changing topic.

— Where the hell were you, yesterday, by the way? I called you like a million times.

— I...

My gaze wonders back to the glass railing on the balcony.

— I was out, I say finally. I came back late. Didn't check my phone.

There's a pause. He knows full well that I'm lying through my teeth. He sighs, resigned.

— Okay. We'll talk later. You'd better give me all the juicy details then, right?

The devil is in the choice of words.

— Yeah, Craig. Sure. I'll... I'll fill you in when I get back.

As if.

I drop the phone beside me, staring at it. My chest tightens, like I can't breathe. I need to get out of here, but my legs won't move.

I shut my eyes. Take a deep breath.

And try to make sense of it all.

Knock, knock.

I rub my palms on my shorts, trying to get rid of the sweat soaking through. I don't remember ever having hands this clammy. And yet here I am, rooted in front of 317, listening to the sound of footsteps approaching the door.

Björn cracks it open.

- Hey. You look like hell.
- Yeah, thanks. Same to you.

He steps aside, motioning me in. Even with the room plunged in semi-darkness, it's a palace of order and cleanliness compared to mine.

— No, it's okay," I say, even as I step inside anyway. "I just... Sven? Can we talk?

Björn flops back onto the bed with the other two, their faces dimly lit by the blue glow of a laptop screen perched on a pile of folded towels.

- Yeah, sure. You seen A Star is Born?
- I caught it on the plane, yeah. Can I talk to you for a sec?
- They cut out a lot on those flights. I've never understood why they do that. Sit down, we're nearly done.
  - I need to talk to you. Now.

Sven's eyes, darker than I remember, lift toward me.

— Just sit and let us watch the end. Or come back later.

I don't want to watch another couple tear each other apart on screen. I've had my fill of that in real life.

— I'll be down by the pool. Come find me when you're free. It's... nothing urgent. Just... whenever.

Right.

Stelios hands me a coffee without a word, not even asking why I look like I've been run over by a truck. It's all his fault anyway. If he hadn't let Sven and his crew set up a pop-up bar in my room last Domain / WATERLINE / 525

night, I wouldn't be in this mess. But I'm too tired to throw blame.

- Gabriel's gone, I guess. I meant to catch him at breakfast.
- Yeah, he left a while ago. Just had a quick coffee and jumped in his cab. You'd have had to be pretty lucky to catch them. They asked me to say goodbye for them.
  - Nice.
  - They're from Boston?

I blink up at him.

- What?
- Gabriel and Vanella—are they from Boston?
- Yeah. From Boston. Or... I don't know, who cares.

— You sure you're ok, Eddie? You look a bit...

And what do I look like, Stelios, Uh? Like a bloke who gave a hand-job to a guy his son's age?

- Will you see each other again?
- What? No! I mean...

I don't even know who he's talking about anymore.

- I've never been to the States, you know? Never left this island, to be honest. That's why I'm doing law school—so I can make enough money and get out of here as soon as I can.
  - What about your parents? Your friends?
- My parents will be happy for me. They've
   been praying for this. As for my friends—if they're

real friends, we'll find a way to stay in touch, don't you think?

— It still takes some effort. You have to remind them you're around. Show up when they need you.

He looks at me like I've just sprouted an extra head.

- You're a strange guy, Eddie.
- Yeah. So have I been told.

I slide my empty cup toward him for a refill and then wander over to the pool, settling under a parasol to wait for Sven to show up.

By the time I've switched to beer, he's still a noshow.

This time, he opens the door when I pound on it.

- We need to talk.
- For fuck's sake, Gus, What's wrong with you?

  Just because we had a bit of fun last night doesn't mean you have to act more annoying than my girlfriend.
  - A bit of fun? But I...

A couple steps out of the room next door, throwing us curious glances. I wait until they're out of earshot.

- But I don't—I was wasted. It should never have happened.
  - Who gives a fuck?
- You don't get it, Sven. You don't get it, I am not—

A dark mask of anger drops on his face.

— Oh, don't give me that bullshit, Eddie. You stroke my cock, you didn't ask me to marry you.

And the door slams in front of my face.

I'm not my father.

That's what I meant to say.

But of course, I am. Just like him—lost, insecure, terrified of what might come next. Battling to take a breath in a life that closed up around me, suffocating in a role I've been playing but where the script got out of hand. We're all trying to claw our way out, hoping to turn back time, start fresh in some other place, some better version of ourselves. Searching in other people's eyes for what we've left behind, desperate for the rush that'll make us feel alive again. Nobody wants to turn the page and discover the story is over, that the next chapters are just an epilogue to wrap it

all up. No surprises, nothing new. If I kept looking around, it was just to fill the space, to put a few more words on the page before accepting that I've reached the point where the plot is sealed.

It's not with you that I was afraid to settle down,

Mathilda—it was with me.

Your magazines would say that this is not the end, it's only the beginning of something new. And as cheesy as it sounds, I'm all in. Because without you, there's nothing left. Nothing but a watermark where the tide once was high.

And I kept swimming away.

He knocks on my door a little later.

- You alright, Gus?
- Yeah. I'm alright. I'll be alright now.
- Wanna go see the sunset?

We follow the gray street winding up along the hillside. In the distance, the ruins of a small castle jut out against the skyline, its crumbling towers reaching toward a sky brushed with faint pink. There's still time before the sun turns red, slipping under the horizon beneath the weight of all those watching eyes. We stay quiet, moving side by side—almost

shoulder to shoulder—toward the island's edge, where the land ends and there's nowhere left to run.

A streak of crimson splits the sky above the rooftops, bleeding into the soft blues and golds. If you listen closely, you can already hear the gods of the sea hurling their waves at the pier, trying to sweep away the lost souls. I'm not going near them this time.

We cross the roundabout, and Diagoras' statue stares me down, his stern gaze boring into my back. My breath catches, my throat dry. The colors swirling together—the kind no painter could ever capture—feel too intense, almost impossible. Like the rest of the crowd, we stand transfixed, caught up in the spell. The sun draws out the sea's longing, and the sea blushes in return. From hesitant touches to gentle caresses, they blend until they're inseparable.

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— I was drunk. I shouldn't have...

A wave crashes, swallowing my words.

He tilts his head toward me, eyes still locked on the blazing horizon.

- What did you say?
- Nothing. Nothing.

He smiles softly and takes my hand.

Standing tall against the light of the setting sun, I see a glimpse of the man he's becoming. Steady.

Strong in his convictions. Unshakeable. His feet planted firmly, chest proud, head high—there he is: the true Colossus of Rhodes.

- One, two...
- No!

— ...three!

We leap into the freezing waves, tossed and tumbled, saltwater burning our skin.

We laugh like idiots, because when you're young, danger is thrilling.

He knocks on my door a bit later.

- You alright, Gus?
- Yeah. I'm alright. I'll be alright now.
- Wanna go see the sunset?

We follow the gray street winding up along the hillside. In the distance, the ruins of a small castle jut out against the skyline, its crumbling towers reaching toward a sky brushed with the faintest hint of pink.

It'll be another half hour before the sun begins to burn red, slowly slipping away beneath the horizon under the weight of all those watching eyes. Like the world around us, we stay silent. Side by side, almost shoulder to shoulder, we move toward the island's edge—where the land ends, and there's nowhere left to run.

A streak of crimson splits the sky above the rooftops, bleeding into the colors around it. If you listen closely, you can already hear the gods of the sea hurling their waves against the pier, trying to sweep away lost souls. I'm not going near them this time.

We cross the roundabout, the stern gaze of
Diagoras' statue boring into the back of my neck. My
breath catches, my throat dry. The swirl of colors—
colors no painter's palette could ever do justice to—
defies belief. Like the rest of the gathered crowd, we
stand awestruck, transfixed by the spellbinding
display. The sun draws out the longing in the sea, and
the sea, in turn, blushes under its gaze. From tentative
touches to tender caresses, they meld into one another
until they are inseparable.

— I was drunk. I shouldn't have...

A wave crashes, swallowing the end of my sentence.

He tilts his head toward me, still mesmerized by the blazing horizon.

- What did you say?
- Nothing. Nothing.

He smiles softly and takes my hand.

Standing tall against the backlight of the setting sun, I catch a glimpse of the man he will become.

Steady. Strong in his convictions. Unshakeable. Feet planted firmly, chest proud, head high—there he is: the true Colossus of Rhodes.

- One, two...
- No!
- ...three!

We leap into the freezing waves, tossed and tumbled around.

And we laugh—we laugh because it's dangerous.

And when you're young, danger's thrilling.

## Epilogue

I will call you today.

I've promised myself.

I'll tell you everything—almost everything.

A few details will slip away, a few lines will be left untold.

You can't hold against me what you'll never know.

I'll say that I've changed. That I finally understand.

That I've stopped chasing my own shadow,

That I'll get better, that I'll become the father

I pushed away, that I'm ready to love and live, and make you whole.

That I will never play *The Last Waltz* again, because our waltz will never end.

And you'll tell me...

You told me that you've met someone.

I'll go for a run.

The tide will be high by now.

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