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## A Faint, Blue Idea of Order

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A FAINT, BLUE IDEA OF ORDER

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Drama and Communications  
Creative Writing

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Wells Oliver, a mathematician, and his partner Malin move to Kythera, a remote Greek island, from Canada and Sweden, their respective countries of origin. In doing so, they hope to transform their lives in a way that will allow them to focus on their budding love affair, but they are also running away from obligations and people they are trying to leave behind. On Kythera, they realize that even in the most distant, exotic locales, the past is never far below the surface.

## **PROLOGUE**

That can't be him, Wells thought, though the stooping grey man in a suit across the large room certainly carried himself as if he could be, gracefully tapping his cigarette in the ashtray and chatting in what seemed like relaxed, almost protracted sentences.

Wells had heard many accounts of the famed expatriate's appearances in various shops and restaurants around the islands. These were always told with such wide-eyed bewilderment that Wells had thus far disregarded them as auto-suggestive delusion or simply nonsense, which is why it seemed all the more improbable to him that they should both be standing in the same anonymous beachfront bar on such a random night.

Just observing him now, Wells could understand the fascination; there was an indescribable elegance to the man's movements, a poise that overpowered the awkwardness of his age. And though one would have been hard-pressed to describe his pale, tired face as handsome, with its deep lines and drooping, almost basset hound-like cheeks, his occasional smile looked like that of a curious little boy, and it alone was undoubtedly magnetic enough to polarize interest. What was he now? Sixty? Seventy? Hard to tell.

The man picked up his glass and took a long dram of the clear liquid—probably mineral water, Wells decided. Or maybe gin and soda? The young woman by his side couldn't have been more than half his age. They talked slowly with something which, from a distance, seemed to Wells the familiarity of lovers. She was predictably beautiful, though not in the manner Wells would have anticipated. His expectations likely exceeded the boundaries of genetic possibility anyway.

Wells desperately wanted to go up to him and introduce himself, but he feared this could be misconstrued as over-zealousness. All of a sudden, he wished Malin had come with him. She

would not have thought twice about walking up to the man and saying hello for them both. Or maybe she would have dismissed the entire thing with an assertive “That doesn’t even look like him,” as she was wont to do.

What if he went right now, by himself? He could tell Malin when he got home; she certainly would be impressed. But what would he say if he did? How would he even interject him, “Hello, Leonard,” or “Pardon me, Mr. Cohen?”



## **PART ONE**

### **WELLS**

## ONE

Wells watched Malin stand in her underwear in front of the bathroom sink, her delicate fingers sifting through her blonde hair, engaged in an epic battle against a few wild strands that seemed to resist any strict discipline. He did not like being late.

Behind her, he sat on the toiled seat cover, the bright light of the room exaggerating the shine of his dress shoes. He stood up and looked at his reflection over Malin's shoulder, straightened his shirt collar, then sat down again. "I was listening to the radio this morning," Wells said. "It was sixteen Celsius on Kensington Road, in Calgary, yesterday."

"In the middle of February?"

"I know. And apparently it's been colder than usual the rest of the winter, in Alberta. Strange."

Malin swayed to the rhythm of the music drifting in from the living room, dancing in slow motion. "It must almost feel like a miracle."

Staring at the honey color of her bare back, Wells made a quick tally. "Mal?"

"Hmmm?"

"How long's it been?"

"What?" Malin asked.

"Look at how dark your back is now."

"I don't know," Malin said before pausing. "Three months?"

Wells smiled. He loved the way the S's seemed to whistle when she blew them out. And he loved that Malin always played the same record when getting ready for a night out. It was as much a part of her ritual as putting on her make-up or selecting her outfit, as defining a trait as a

fingerprint or a birthmark. She sang gently, carefully shaping the words with her lips. *Songs from a Room* had become a suitcase filled with their collective history.

“Aidan thinks he saw Leonard Cohen at *Zebra’s* last weekend,” Wells said.

Malin didn’t turn around to look at him. “There are Cohen sightings all over. It was probably just a random tourist with graying hair.” She began to blow-dry her hair carefully, straightening it and slowly brushing out the tangles as she always did after a long day at the beach.

Wells looked at himself in the mirror again and felt the stubble on his cheeks. “Can’t find my damn razor,” he said. “Have you seen it?”

She turned around and shook her head. “Leave it. I like it that way.”

“OK, are we ready then?”

This sent Malin across the room. “Almost, I promise, two minutes—Are we already late?”

Fluster, Wells thought, gives her a peculiar charm.

She returned to the bathroom after a moment, holding three dresses in one hand and struggling to attach her bra with the other.

“I’m ready,” she announced proudly after having selected the dress—a slinky beige number. “Are *you* ready?” knowing he’d been waiting for over forty-five minutes.

Wells enjoyed those small moments the most: the silence, the intensity with which Malin burned when looking at herself in the mirror and slowly painting her eyelids in deep blue, dusting her angular cheek bones with faint sparkles. He felt a quiet, passionate complicity connecting them as he watched her getting ready.

“Are you hungry?” Wells asked as Malin stored her cosmetics.

“A little bit, maybe, but I can wait. We *really* have to go.”

Wells got up and walked swiftly toward the kitchen. “I don’t know how long *I* can wait. We’re already late anyway.”

The colors of the painted stucco walls exuded a glowing warmth that flooded the room. The early evening light filled the kitchen with soft shadows. Wells’ shoes slapped the uneven, brown ceramic floor as he ambled toward the large window at the back. On the old wooden table, in the middle of the small room, sat a large vase filled with freshly cut apple blossoms and blue hydrangea flowers.

In what now seemed to him like a former life, Wells had perceived houses as protection from the outside world, as isolated booths in which to live. There had been something comforting to him about the idea of the house as home, but in Kythera, with Malin, this claustrophobic craving for security had started to fade. The house was a continuation of its external environment; as the living room drifted into the kitchen, the sea drifted into their rooms.

In the distance, the sun seemed to slowly sink in the pale, dirty water of the Mediterranean. A neatly arranged series of pots—basil, thyme, mint and oregano—lined the ledge above the sink. A few bowls filled with fruits and vegetables rested on the counter; plump tomatoes with their dark stems, ripening avocados, their green, almost crusty peel slowly softening and rippling, turning a brownish black.

Wells opened the small refrigerator, hoping to find something there, but only meat, a few eggs and a pitcher of water were put away. Thing’s so small, he thought, it would look ridiculous at home. The freezer, almost a theoretical affair, was barely large enough for a few dozen ice cubes and a ball of pastry dough.

He thought of a radio show he had listened to one morning, in which he had heard a cultivator being interviewed about a labor issue in a farming community. Despite the peasant's thick accent and the hurried pace of his speech, Wells had managed to make out a few sentences, one being that *any man who puts tomatoes away in a refrigerator should be jailed*. He loved the idea of someone being passionate enough about food to think this way.

Wells picked up a mango from the windowsill. "Want some mango, honey?"

Nothing.

He cut the fruit along its long axis, then drew horizontal and vertical lines in the yellow flesh with the tip of the knife, careful to have the lines meet at right angles: a perfect square matrix. Wells pulled his stomach away from the kitchen counter and extended his arms. He pushed up on the peel with his thumbs and juice ran down his wrists as he stepped toward the kitchen sink, trying to lick them faster than it would take for the liquid to reach the rolled sleeves of his white shirt. The little cutout squares of flesh projected out in all directions and, looking at it now, the fruit reminded him of a small orange armadillo.

Wells walked slowly toward the bathroom bearing the two pieces and was less than surprised to find Malin there, still putting the finishing touches on her make-up. She stowed everything quickly again and turned around. "So, are we going?" she asked, a slight guilty expression on her face.

Wells extended an arm and presented her with the dome of juicy flesh. "Here. You should eat a little, too, before going out."

"Thanks dad," Malin said with a smirk, biting off a piece.

They both stood over the bathroom sink, their lower bodies away from it, as the juices dribbled on their chins. The mango's flesh was sweet and tangy. They dropped the bare peels in the wastebasket and washed their hands.

Wells let the water run, squeezing out a few drops of liquid soap from the plastic bottle, and rubbed Malin's hands between his, slowly, carefully. He kissed her, and tasted the sweetness of the fruit on her lips.

A stone stairway made up of two short flights of stairs running in opposite directions, connected by a small landing, and enclosed in whitewashed plaster walls, led to street level. Walking down, the coolness of the air surprised them. Wells halted for an instant and looked up. The cloudless sky seemed immense over them, with the light slowly dimming, turning into a yellow glow that painted the white stucco walls and the reddish-brown tiled roofs everywhere.

Malin turned around, took Wells' arm and hooked it under hers. "Come on, don't try to delay us getting there now that I'm ready."

Kapsali was busy and lively on that Friday evening. Looking at the blue and gray slate tiles of the boardwalk, with people ambling in all directions, Wells thought of an immense chess game, so many pieces moving at once.

The café tables were out, each covered with a white linen cloth anchored by an elastic band to protect them from sudden gusts of wind. Most of the chairs painted in bright colors—blue, green and red—were already occupied. Old men sat playing cards or talking, drinking water milky with ouzo or *rètsina*, and slowly picking olives from small bowls placed in the center of the tables. A few of the café regulars looked up at them, many did not, far too involved in their lively discussions about politics or football.

The restaurants, bistros and cafés lining the beach buzzed with the rush of the early dinner crowd of sunburned, smiling tourists. In the harbor, a few fishing caïques bobbed about, their anchors barely discernible through the murky water flamed by the stretched-out lights of the buildings. They walked by, attempting to read the names off of the sides of the ships, making out the words half way through.

The air carried a delicious perfume of roasting *melanzane*—the plump, purple eggplants—garlic and lemon. On rooftop terraces, tables complete with colored umbrellas and bottles of sparkling water seemed to reach for the sky. Hungry people sat everywhere, scrutinizing menus, probably torn between *Mousaka*, *Youvrelakia*, *Pastitsi* and *Yemista*, suddenly realizing that a choice implied the sacrifice of not getting something else.

“Why is Yiannis always there?” Wells asked.

“What?”

“Is Yiannis going to be there?”

Malin stopped and looked at him. “I don’t know, why?”

“He’s just so... pompous. And he drools all over himself when you’re in the room.”

“Come on. Now you’re being difficult on purpose.”

Wells stared straight at Malin, all lightness gone from his step.

“Alright, he does get a little creepy when he talks to me sometimes, but he’s harmless.”

“Sometimes I can’t tell,” Wells said.

“What?”

“I can’t tell if you’re playing dumb or if you really are a little slow.”

Malin slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “Shut up. And hurry up, will you?”

Wells trailed behind. He watched Malin in front of him, her evening dress light in the breeze, her small hips articulating in semi-circular motions. Maybe it was the contrast of the darkness of her skin with the pale dress, maybe the smooth shape of her calves or the sweet draft of her perfume, maybe even only a temporary disproportionate mixture of neurochemicals. He did not know for sure. The only thing Wells did know on that night was that he loved this woman more than he ever had before.

In the decorated living room of the house, flowers graced every corner: vases on small tables and painted urns on the floor. The air felt thick with the acrid smell of dark tobacco smoke. Malin stopped in the foyer and checked her clothes.

Their friend ran to them, her long coal-black hair floating behind like an afterthought. Gabriella jumped in Wells' arms. “¡Hola!” she said, kissing him on both cheeks. “I see you brought the woman.” She bowed to Malin. “Come on, let me introduce you to *la crème de la crème*.” Malin turned to Wells.

“Go,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll mingle.”

She smiled a thankful smile and started off with Gabriella.

Wells stood there for a moment, collecting himself, then gazed about the room with an inquisitive look. The heterogeneousness of the crowd pleased him. Small groups of five or six people, each with a plastic glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, filled the vast living room. Through the smoke and aroma of food, one could distinctly perceive the smell of the Mediterranean. Wells decided that every party should at least have that going for it.



The kitchen table had been moved to the main room and placed alongside the wall. Wells made his way to the small, improvised bar, making out a few familiar faces. He poured himself a little ouzo on ice and topped the plastic glass with soda.

“*Yáso*,” he heard a female voice utter tentatively.

Wells turned around. “Sorry?” He could not recognize the woman.

“Oh! You speak English. Great. I’m Aley,” the woman said.

He shook her hand. “Wells.” She was attractive. This may not be so bad after all, he thought. “Aidan’s told me a bit about you,” he said. “Where did you guys meet again?”

Aley smiled. “Gabriella and I met in San Sebastián last year.”

There was something in her eyes—maybe a glimmer of madness—that Wells found enticing, but he couldn’t quite pin it down. He noticed the circular shape of a ring around her nipples, protruding through her shirt. What was it that Aidan had said about her? “That’s right, I remember now. And what do you do again?”

“I’m a correspondent for NPR; public radio in the US.”

“I know, NPR.” Wells nodded. “Lived in Chicago for a while,” he added, hoping the look on his face somehow matched the tone of his voice. He felt a little embarrassed; the muscles in his face refused to answer to normal instructions. He was absorbed in trying to figure out what he liked about her. Aley seemed mostly oblivious to this, or at least she pretended to be. A part of him was thankful for it. “And you’re working out of Kythera?”

“Athens mostly, but I’m doing a series on the history of a few of the islands, so I come here periodically.” She said it simply, but Wells felt as if she were challenging him. Or maybe sending out an invitation.

“And you?” she asked.

“Me what?”

“What do you do?”

“Right now? Not much,” Wells said.

She waited for more.

“I’m a mathematician.”

“Where do you work?”

“Finished a project, and a degree, in Chicago, then moved here.”

They looked around for a few seconds, both searching for a question to ask, a thread of conversation to offer.

“Are you here alone? In Greece, I mean,” Aley asked.

Wells noticed a small scar on Aley’s forehead. It made her face feel foreign to him. He tried not to stare. “Malin and I came together four or five months ago.” He pointed to the short, blonde woman across the room. “She’s from Sweden.”

“So, *you’re* Malin’s partner?”

*Partner?* He nodded.

“And you’re from—”

“Canada.”

“Right.”

“What about you?” Wells asked, now speaking directly in Aley’s ear because of the sudden burst in volume of the music.

“Originally from Seattle.”

“OK.”

Wells felt her nipple ring on his arm. “How long are you guys going to stay here? Do you know?” she asked, looking over Wells’ right shoulder, past him, at some people who had just walked in the door. She kept nodding for him as she silently formed words with her lips to notify the newcomers that she’d come over to greet them as soon as she could. Embarrassed by her sudden lack of interest, Wells excused himself and asked for the restrooms, but did not even have to move; she left right away.

Wells decided to wait out a little bit before engaging in a second round of socializing and instead stayed by the improvised bar for some time, nursing his drink and observing the people around him with fascination. Malin seemed immersed in a conversation with Gabriella. “Bueno,” Wells heard her say, then something in Russian before she threw her head back, laughing.

A hand on Wells’ shoulder startled him.

“Oi!” Aidan said. “You talked with Aley?”

“Yeah, sort of—”

“She’s nice, yeah?”

Wells nodded.

“She’s cute though, right?”

“Yeah, she’s pretty cute.” Change the subject. “This place is amazing.”

“Thank God her father pays for it. I could never afford it.”

“Can’t complain about that, I guess. What does her father—”

“You’re half empty there mate,” Aidan interrupted.

“I’m taking it slow tonight.”

“Listen to you: pathetic,” Aidan added, amused.

Wells smiled. “You seem to be doing alright, though.”

“Just fine, just fine. But Gabie was mental earlier. She lost a wooden ring she bought in Columbia when she was a child. I think she’s forgotten about it now.”

Wells shrugged. “Maybe it’ll turn up. Pace yourself, might be a long night.”

“No need. Plenty of time to recoup,” Aidan said, then, turning serious, “Drink a little for me, brother,” as he poured a little more ouzo in Wells’ glass. “I’ll go see what the girls are doing.”

In the room, the different conversations melted into one another so that the roar of the crowd became a distant, soothing hum. Individual words uttered in Greek, French, English or German became one and the same, like the cyclic melody of ocean breakers. Wells took another sip from his glass; the ouzo went down slowly, his throat warm with the alcohol, his tongue almost numb with delight.

He watched Aidan walk up to a small circle of people in which he spotted Gabriella, then Malin by her side, her head barely clearing the woman’s broad shoulders. The messy-haired Irishman topped off Malin’s glass, and Yiannis joined them, asking for a refill. She’s going to be wreck tomorrow, Wells thought. It was both exhilarating and slightly awkward to stare at her with all the detachment he could muster; the same feeling he used to get as a child when he would hide and spy on his older brother studying in his bedroom.

In privacy, people’s body language, their movements and rhythm change completely. The absence of external scrutiny allows for a freedom never possible outside of those moments. As soon as Cameron would discover Wells hiding in the doorway, containing his laughter or making shuffling noises, everything would revert back to normal; his brother’s movements would instantly lose their loose elegance and become dry, almost robotic again.

As Malin stood there in that crowd, free from the weight of Wells' gaze, she seemed to be altogether another woman. He wondered for a moment whether the feeling it generated in him was more akin to estrangement or fascination. It is scary, he thought, to see someone you feel that you know well do something so out of character that you wonder if you've been imagining, creating a person who does not really exist, instead of seeing who is right in front of you. Is it only an extension of ourselves that we project onto other people? Is that why we become disappointed at their shortcomings when they act in a way that we perceive as being out of character for them?

He watched her in silence for a few minutes. He saw Malin laugh a laugh he did not know, saw her smile a smile he had never seen, and wondered for a moment if those were the expressions of her face when she was away from him. Doesn't one feel almost closer to the freedom of isolation in a crowd? There is a form of detachment that is all but impossible to achieve in a one on one relationship.

He stared, hypnotized by the graceful weightlessness of her deliberate fingers, waltzing in the crowded air. Her body seemed to move in smooth waves.

There was something about Yiannis that Wells just did not like, maybe his self-confidence, or just maybe that he looked so much better than he deserved to, all muscles, shiny hair and smooth skin. He watched him brush up against Malin as they talked, standing in the middle of the congested room. I bet she'd sleep with him if I weren't here, Wells thought.

He walked out and sat on the front steps. Through the light cotton of his pants, he could feel the smoothness of the slate. Wells looked up, fascinated by the sheer perfection of the firmament, ebony flecked with white, cloudless and vast beyond measure. He closed his eyes

and exaggerated a few inhalations, filling his lungs with the fresh and damp night air. He could make out distant perfumes of flowers and spices in the sharp marine breeze.

The door opened noisily to let out a stumbling, boisterous troupe likely making its way to a local *taverna*. He was sitting on the front steps of a grey stone building, on this island, in Greece, waiting for Malin. Him, sitting there, at a party, in Greece. He knew all these individual facts to be accurate, and yet, they felt external to him. It seemed so unlikely, so far removed from the reality of his life six months before, that it could have been a parallel universe, one that he was a part of to a certain extent but still couldn't grasp in its entirety. Something he could have been reading in a magazine. What would Anna think if she saw him now? Would he even dare tell her?

A soft voice resonated with disapproval from behind him, catching him off-guard, "There you are." Malin threw in a shake of the head for good measure. "What are you doing here?"

He could sense that her question revealed more disappointment than worry.

"Come on. You said you'd at least try," Malin said impatiently.

Wells perked up. "I did. I talked to this one girl, Aley—"

"God, you're impossible."

"What do you like in those parties anyway?"

"Let's not get into this right now," Malin said, aggravated.

They paused.

"Have you been sitting here long? Tell me you were in there for at least a little while, tell me you tried."

"I was—I mean, I did. I just needed a little air."

It wasn't exactly true, but not exactly a lie either. He knew she could live with that answer. "Do you want to go back in?" Wells asked. A fine mist started coming down. The water was cold on his cheeks.

Malin kissed his neck. "Want to go home?"

Of course, I do, Wells thought. He nodded and got up. They started back, walking side by side without touching.

"How many nights could you survive without me?" Malin asked.

Wells thought for a second and said, in a tone of false reproach, "I don't know, but they'd go by a lot faster if I wasn't waiting for you all the time." He smiled tentatively.

Malin pushed him to the side. "You're impossible," she whispered, as if giving up.

They trudged along the sea, by the docks, then up the road toward Hora, the faint anemic glow of the old streetlights guiding their way home.

## TWO

A soft breeze carrying perfumes of lilac, lavender and the scent of lemon blew smoothly. The early morning light diffracted through a drop of water dangling dizzily off an olive branch, and a miniature rainbow burst out of the droplet, melting into the bleached stucco walls.

Wells was standing on the terrace overlooking the sea far below; his white shirt and linen pants fluttering in the wind like the sails on a small boat. Bill Evans' piano, faintly audible, floated out through the opened dark blue shutters. "What do you mean?" he asked into the phone.

"Well," his father said, I've been meaning to call, but I couldn't find your number. I had to ask Cameron, and I can't figure out if he's living on the same planet as us half of the time. I was nervous I'd be phoning a gift shop in China."

"Right."

"Hey, we bought that lot by exit 14, the one Beaudoin tried to steal from us. And your brother pulled that one off, to be fair. I don't know what he told him, but between you and I, I was pretty impressed. That's just him though, I mean, Cameron'll make me wonder how he remembers to put on his boxer shorts in the morning, then, out of the blue, he'll pull something like that."

"Good for him," Wells said. "You've wanted that land for a long time, right?"

"Yeah, we needed to get our hands on this one; we couldn't get the water services to the 50 acres behind without having to go through, and they're almost finished with the highway exit belt now. They're scheduled to start pouring concrete for the shopping center next week."

"Right."



“I haven’t decided if we’re going to build the retirement home and manage it ourselves or just sell the project. I think we could make a few bucks handling it internally, but Cameron keeps bugging me about being wiser with the money.”

“He means well though,” Wells said.

“I know, I know. I’m not as hard on him as I sound.”

“Mom and him having a good trip?”

“They decided to go visit Helen in Victoria and spend a week there before heading to Vancouver,” his father said.

“Oh yeah?”

“She worries about you.”

“Well, tell her I’m fine. She shouldn’t worry. God, it’s not like I’m—”

“It’s not because she doesn’t think you’re alright, she just worries when she doesn’t know what is going on. It’s her French blood. You know. She used to get on my case for buying you kids firecrackers.”

Wells shifted in his chair. “I know, I know.”

“Give her a call when you get a chance, won’t you.”

“Sure, dad.”

“So tell me, what have you been doing?”

“Keeping busy.”

“I’ll send you a bit of money this week.”

“No, I’m OK, really.”

“Still using up the rest of your student loans?”

“And the money I made working in Chicago. I’m fine, I promise.”

“How long do you think it’ll be?”

“For what?” Wells asked.

“Until you come back?”

“Why?”

“We’re ready for you to come back whenever you can. There’s so much work that I can’t do everything myself and I don’t trust anyone to do it well. Plus you’re too smart to just lounge around your whole life.” His father paused, then, “I do all this stuff for you boys anyway. I don’t want to see my whole life’s work going down the drain.”

Wells sighed. “I know.”

“I think it’d be good for you to know what’s happening. You have to learn to manage the business; somebody will have to take over soon enough.”

“I know. Listen dad, I’m going to have to let you go.”

“Alright. Call your mother, okay?”

Wells pressed the phone button down forcefully. No other sounds around, nothing but the whisper of a slight breeze.

Mariannapolis High School. Senior year. That is when Wells had first decided he wanted to leave Montreal.

He loved the city: going to a Canadians game at the Forum on Atwater, then walking down Sainte-Catherine’s with friends late on a Saturday night, roasting *shish-taouk* and *narguileh* smoke in the air; stopping for a quick coffee on the way, or a few beers at the *Cock and Bull* because they never carded.

There was scarcely anything you couldn't find or do. Yet Wells felt contained, restricted, castrated. But at seventeen, he did not know how well he would fare by himself in a foreign land. Once he made the decision, however, the urgency began to fade a little. He just had to bide his time.

In his last semester at Mariannapolis, already enrolled at McGill—Canada's Harvard, his father used to say—Wells clandestinely took the SAT's and applied to a few small colleges in California and Oregon. But even then, the move seemed too bold, too consequential.

Within a week of the start of university classes, Wells traded majors, dropping business for math. His father winked at him, "Economics, eh?" he said, "smart." One year, Wells decided. One year.

And when Anna came along, it suddenly seemed less critical, more like a decision that could wait. Until he couldn't anymore. The PhD was the perfect alibi: nobody at McGill could supervise research on deformation models of the human spine. The look Gary Oliver gave his son following the announcement stayed with Wells for months afterwards. His father did not try to hold him back. He did not even argue that the move was a mistake. But his characteristic frown—one eyebrow sloping down, and one pointing up in its center, like an arrow—revealed plenty, though Wells could not decide whether it was disappointment, plain worry, or both.

One thing that was certain, Gary Oliver did not think much of math or research, nor was he interested in the U.S.A. All that mattered to him was his family, the business, his country. In that order.

Wells heard footsteps behind him. He did not turn to look; he could feel her presence, feel her behind him.

“Did the cats wake you up with their mating call?” Wells asked gently. He waited patiently for an answer, but none came. “Come here,” he said. He heard Malin’s little feet shuffling on the terrace floor, and then she was there, the morning sun illuminating her face, her small eyes still heavy with sleep, her hair dancing in the breeze. He nodded down toward the edge of the wooden chair he was sitting on, spreading his knees a little to make room for her. “Come here.”

Malin sat quietly between his legs and leaned back on him, then rested her head on his shoulder. Wells put his hand in her hair and played with it a little, the other one drawing small circles on her stomach.

She kept silent for a moment and took a shallow breath. “I just had a horrible dream. My father was driving to work and I knew he was going to have an accident; that he would die. I was trying to tell him, but he couldn’t see me; it was like I was watching a movie I’d seen before and had no control over. It was terrible.”

Malin stopped and breathed in deeply. She shivered. “I woke up abruptly, I think maybe a shutter banged, and I felt sick to my stomach for a minute. I wasn’t sure where I was or if any of it was true.”

Wells leaned back, putting his feet up on the plastered half-wall enclosing the terrace. Beyond it, in the distance, a dozen sailboats punctuated the sea’s emerald green surface. In the sky, a few nimbus clouds, white as Montreal’s first snow of the year, dragged their indistinct shapes lazily.

He held Malin tight against him. She was trembling a little. “Everything’s fine now,” he whispered.

Malin sighed. Wells touched her hand gently. Her breathing slowed down. “Hey,” she said.

“Mmm...”

“Something wrong?”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah yeah.”

“How long have you been up?” Malin asked.

“A while. Phone woke me up.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I came outside to talk,” Wells said.

“Who was it? A friend?”

“No, a friend would know that five’s a little early to call,” he said.

“Your dad? Everything okay?”

Wells kept silent for a moment, as if to contemplate the many ramifications of the question. “I don’t know; he has this way of making me feel guilty and be so nice at the same time that I can’t even hate him for it. He asked me what I was doing, what was going on, but I realized that he just wanted to tell me about the business.”

“What about it?”

“You know; same as usual: things are going well, this year will be tough, he’s been working hard and Cammy’s doing a good job but they could use some help, there’s no one he really trusts besides me—they are starting a new residential development.”

“Well,” Malin tried, “you don’t have to feel bad about—”

“You don’t understand,” Wells said, more abruptly than he had intended to.

“Understand what?”

“The man’s worked his entire life for his two sons. How can I not feel guilty being here drinking ouzo all day while he’s slowly killing himself out there?”

“That’s his life,” Malin said calmly. “Don’t you think that, above everything else, he’d be glad to know you’re happy here?”

Wells knew she was right, but it did not change the way he felt. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” he said. “It pisses me off.”

The wind had started to die down and the heat radiating from the sun was gradually warming their skin.

Malin touched his hair. “I’m so glad to be here,” she said.

“I know.” Wells rested his chin on her head, warming up her hands between his. “I’m going to go clean up the house a bit, it looks like a tornado passed through.”

“Can’t you just sit with me for a minute?”

“You relax. I’ve been sitting here long enough,” he said, and walking into the house, determined to put everything in its right place.

### THREE

Wells walked cautiously, thongs in hand, lifting a foot every fourth or fifth step, trying to keep from burning his feet. The light sand glistened in the morning sun.

“Hot hot hot!” Aidan said, jumping from one foot to the other.

“Like red coals.”

“Can’t believe how quiet the beach is, though.”

As September had rolled by, the crowds had dwindled to about half of what they had been during the summer months. There were still scores of Australian and German tourists lying out in the sun with their angular accents, but it did not feel like they were overtaking the country anymore.

The two men strolled the length of the small beach, picking their way through a maze of umbrellas and idle sunbathers. At its extremity, they climbed up a large rock formation, trying not to attract attention.

They emerged into a long bright field covered in wild tea, oleander and white anemone flowers, the perfumes blending in different proportions—some combinations wonderful, some positively foul—with each stride.

The trail carried them through rock bluffs and dizzying ledges. Waves crashed on the sharp cliffs before pulling away again with a soothing, regular cadence. They walked quietly for a few minutes and the trail began descending abruptly, leading them to a gorge nestling a small deserted beach.

“How did you find this place anyway?” Wells said.

“Aley showed me. She was bloody proud of having discovered it too.”

“You came here with Aley?”

“You jealous?” Aidan asked.

“No, it’s just—what did Gabriella—”

“She was with us.” He shook his head. “What’s wrong, mate?”

“I’m worried about Malin.”

“Worried *about* her?” Aidan asked.

“Well, OK, worried about myself. It’s just. I don’t know. I know she loves me.”

“Can you even doubt that? She thinks you’re so much funnier than you really are; I promise you.”

Wells frowned. “Thanks.”

They both pulled long towels from their backpacks and set them on the sand, close together—two bright cotton rectangles like parallel flags floating on a beige sea.

“True,” Aidan said.

“This is the first time we’re living together. I’m not used to having to deal with other people around.”

“Like?”

“Like Yiannis. He clearly likes her.”

Aidan sighed as he lay down on his towel. “Yiannis is a wanker. He likes all the women he meets.”

“Maybe, but he likes Malin. I can tell. And I can’t figure out if she realizes that he does or if she’s really oblivious to it all. I can’t think she would be.”

“But you’re a man.”

Wells turned to Aidan, furrowing his brow.



“We think other guys are too obvious because we recognize ourselves in them, no? Women can’t see that. Or else nobody’d ever get to shag.”

“Still, I mean, Yiannis is not being too discreet about it.”

“Just stop worrying about it for a minute, will you.”

Waking up that morning, they had not known whether to heed the warning of the terrifying storm that was supposedly on its way, or to just go about their morning routine. It certainly looked as if even the sky had also chosen to ignore the forecast: the sun, bright and yellow, warmed their chest and the crystalline sand around them. The *provenza* had cleared.

“What have you got going on today?” Wells asked Aidan. “Anything special?”

“Not really; well, I’m working on something, actually.”

“Really? What?”

Aidan sighed. “Gabriella kept bugging me about repainting the inside of the house, so that’s what I’m doing.”

Wells laughed.

“It’s OK. I’m almost done.”

“What’s *she* doing today?”

“She had to work. Her father called last night to ask her to take care of some papers, like. She never really tells me about that stuff, so I don’t ask.”

“What does her father do again?”

“Investment banking in Moscow,” Aidan answered, making quotation mark signs with his fingers.

Wells had no plans for the rest of the day, which he knew would basically consist in a series of surprises and random encounters, and although he had hoped, earlier, for the rain to come to validate his inactivity, he was now happy that his wish had not been granted.

Wells turned towards Aidan to inquire whether he shared the feeling, but his interrogations were answered simply by looking at the man: Aidan was lying on his back, wearing his dark sunglasses and looking as if he'd spent his entire life doing just that. The only thing he seemed to be battling was sunburn.

"Fuck," the Irishman cried with undisguised forthrightness. "It is *so* hot. Are you coming in the water?"

Wells tried to conceal a smile. He always thought it amusing to hear Aidan curse unexpectedly, often most inappropriately, like a foul-mouthed teenager.

They rose to their feet and ran to the edge of the water, diving in simultaneously. The sea swallowed Wells' body. The surprisingly refreshing water washed his skin of the sweat and sun. He opened his eyes and saw Aidan swimming under water, his not-quite-graceful body fluid in its movements, small whirlpools forming around his extremities. The fishes navigating inquisitively around them were large and bright, the coral sharp and colorful. Looking up, he could see the surface, shimmering silver dancing under the sunlight. He closed his eyes, held his knees to his chest and exhaled deeply to empty his lungs. His body dropped slowly until he hit bottom and felt the smoothness of polished stones on his shins. Wells stayed there, perfectly still, surrounded by a flawless silence until he heard a diffuse and confusing shout that seemed to come from all around. He pushed himself up. As his upper body emerged from the water, he heard Aidan's nervous voice, "Jesus!"

"What?" Wells said, perplexed.

“You always do this, it scares the piss out of me. You disappear for so long it looks like you’re drowning.”

“It’s just so comfortable down there,” Wells said.

On the way back toward Hora, they again passed through the public beach, which had now gained in density. Along both sides of the road, cars were shoehorned in the tightest spots and in the most unlikely fashion: some with two wheels on the modest sidewalk, some almost perpendicular to the road.

They reached Plateia Dimitriou Staï as the sun did its zenith, a faint breeze bringing only the slightest relief from the intense heat. The square was bright, but shaded along its edges by a canopy of overhanging pots of marigold plants, bell-shaped hyacinth flowers and a few lemon and palm trees.

They loved to have Sunday lunch together in the plaza. It was a habit they had slipped into without resistance. They always met people, listened in on a few conversations, and generally enjoyed the food and the sweetness of the afternoon hours slowly drifting by.

Wells gazed about, taken by the flamboyant colors filling the small space. The umbrellas over the tables were crisp and white in the sunlight, the hibiscus, bougainvillea and other flowers, blue, orange and pink; even the tables, covered by checkered white and yellow tablecloths and surrounded by their olive-green chairs, fit perfectly in the décor.

Wells remembered having read that the sculptor Henry Moore had once said, objects in Greece seem to be illuminated by a light that flows from within. That description seemed inexpressibly accurate.

The friendly waiter at *Niko’s* greeted them warmly. He did not bother bringing them menus. “A cold beer or an ouzo, guys?” he asked.

“Neither,” Wells said, “too early, too hot. Just a Perrier and lemon please.”

“I’ll have both then, *parakaló*,” Aidan added. “You’re not thirsty, brother?” turning to Wells.

“I am, but water should be enough.”

“You don’t have to work today, do you now?”

“I’ll be fine with the water, really.”

The waiter came back with their drinks and placed a small bowl of dark olives in the center of the table. They sipped their refreshments quietly. “That’s disgusting, how can you alternate between each sip?” Wells asked with horror.

Aidan smiled. “It’s great, try,” holding out his glass.

Wells gestured with his hand. “Thanks.” He snapped his fingers, remembering to ask, “You didn’t borrow my old silver razor by any chance, did you?”

Aidan shook his head.

“Thought so. A gift from my grandfather. Been looking everywhere for it. Anyway. Oh, did I tell you this: I think I might have seen Leonard Cohen at Zebra’s on Tuesday.”

“The singer? He lives on Hydra, though, everybody knows that.”

“So? Doesn’t mean it couldn’t have been him.”

“Doesn’t he spend his summers in Canada, like?”

“The guy I saw looked exactly like him. It had to be him. And to think that he’s broke now; somebody should help him: the guy is a legend.”

Aidan didn’t seem impressed. He shrugged. The waiter walked back to the table with a dish in each hand and placed them more or less randomly on the table, assuming they would each pick at both plates. Aidan went straight for the calamari. He squeezed a few wedges of lemon

over everything and put a few of the small bits of white flesh, sprinkled with oregano, in his mouth. “It’s so good,” he said, chewing.

Wells moved the *kolokithikolouloudo* plate closer to him and bit into one of the battered and fried zucchini flowers, stuffed with cheese and pungent with garlic. The food was generous. They ate slowly and with gusto, taking an occasional sip from their drink.

“There’s something else I didn’t tell you earlier,” Wells said after the waiter had cleared the table.

“What?”

“I found a condom wrapper in the trash at home yesterday when I was cleaning up.”

“Shit. Not yours?”

“Don’t know. Definitely not the kind I usually buy, though I guess I have a few odd ones in the night table drawer at home. I have to admit that I never really pay attention to the wrapper.”

“Did you tell Malin?”

“I did, and she seemed unaffected. ‘What?’ she said when I showed her. I asked whose it was and she laughed as if I was being ridiculous. She said she probably threw it out in the kitchen because I left it laying around.”

“You don’t think that’s true?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I just don’t remember *seeing* it laying around.”

“Maybe someone else threw it out in your kitchen.”

“That’s my point,” Wells added flatly.

“No, I mean someone cleaning out his pockets, like.”

“Hadn’t thought of that. We did have a few people over this week. Don’t know. I didn’t think anything of it at first, and then I started thinking of Yiannis and—”

“That’s bollocks; oh—” Aidan lifted an elbow as the waiter deposited a platter of *carpouzi*—thick and juicy slices of watermelon—for dessert. Wells dropped the subject.

After coffee, he watched his friend with renewed interest; Wells had never noticed how carefully Aidan masticated his food, or that he swallowed it with such commendable discretion. This is my friend, he told himself while watching Aidan, the words surprising in their authority. They had completely different backgrounds, upbringings, and had no shared experiences or past aside from the previous few months, and yet Wells felt close to Aidan, closer to him than to a lot of the people who would have been offended at him even hinting at such a notion.

New friends see us as we are in the present, Wells thought. They have an appreciation of us entirely based on the person that we have become. Their vision is not clouded by the dust of our past. They don’t get suddenly offended and ask, “Since when do you drink goat’s milk anyway?” We are a summation of our past, the product of our previous experiences, but no single event or isolated part of one’s former life is a direct and reliable representation of what we are in the present. New friends are not distracted by these things; they live in the present with the person you have become.

Despite the relative newness of our friendship, Wells thought, Aidan is probably the person who knows who it is that I am and what it means to be me today better than anyone else.

When Wells and Aidan reached Potamos in the early afternoon, it seemed that everybody on the island had decided to as well. Even tourists came to the market on Sunday.

Standing in front of their tables overloaded with precariously stacked bread, cheeses and olives, fruits and vegetables, friendly vendors praised their merchandise. The produce themselves seemed free of restraint: carrots so bright that they looked red, long stringy beans greener than a freshly mowed lawn.

The two friends walked the maze of the open-air market slowly, letting their senses assimilate the experience, stopping along the way to acknowledge a nod of the head, to investigate the ripeness of a tomato or smell a large melon.

Wells discreetly gazed at a few severe, matronly looking women dressed in heavy black clothes despite the heat, exercising the utmost care in their choice of produce or of a cut of meat. He liked the idea of a life that starts every day with a walk to the market and the baking of fresh bread.

He threw a few furtive glances at Aidan, observing him as he would a stranger: his gait was solid and confident, but lacked the square elegance of many of the men's on the island. Aidan seemed to waddle more than walk, his large, heavy feet slapping the ground with every step.

Aidan waved and nodded, throwing a few *kali-mera* to the occasional neighbor or acquaintance. Both in manners and appearance, he was about as inconspicuous as a black man in Scandinavia, but despite the sharp contrast with native character, his candor and easygoing nature made him a natural candidate for acceptance by local people. Nobody seemed to mind Aidan; he tried to blend, rather unsuccessfully, but people liked him and appreciated his efforts.

A couple of fisherman from the North Cape, whom Wells recognized, stopped and started chatting with Aidan. Wells left him there and decided to go buy the few items that he would need for dinner. An idea always came to him when walking in the market.

Lamb with green beans, Malin's favorite, is what Wells settled on. He would cook the meat with pearl onions and a lot of garlic, fresh rosemary and oregano. He visited a few stands to find the perfect ripe cherry tomatoes, crisp green beans and the best cut of meat, which he was severely instructed by the butcher not to overcook, as it was well-known that foreigners always did for fear of one disease or another. Wells solemnly swore to stick by the instructions and smiled at the plump man, his right hand ceremoniously placed over his heart. He stopped for wine before returning to Aidan.

He found the chirpy Irishman standing in the exact spot where he had left him half an hour before, hands aflutter, head bobbing vehemently, absorbed in conversation with two scantily clad women. Wells walked slowly towards them, self-conscious for the bags hanging from his arm like Christmas tree decorations. He cleared his throat. "Do you have the time?"

"Sorry, mate," Aidan said, and the two women shrugged, offering their bare forearms as evidence. "Well, actually, think I just heard someone say it was a quarter after four or something."

"Oh, we should—"

"I know. You're going. You always go for that bloody nap. We're in perfectly good company here," raising his voice as if to make sure the women would hear.

Wells turned to them and bowed, then faced Aidan again. "Something wrong?"

"No, I just don't understand why you go so mental over this. You could sleep later."

"I'm going. I'll talk to you later. Will you be OK?"

"Sure, I'll get a lift with someone. Have a good trip tomorrow."

They shook hands, and Aidan turned to face the women again, plunging right back in the conversation.





Walking into the kitchen, Wells was greeted by a near-perfect silence. He put the meat away in the refrigerator and emptied his pockets on the table. Malin had left a note there, reminding him to check the bathroom sink. How the hell was he going to get out of this one? How could he tell her he had no idea what to do about it? She would be disappointed if he did. A man should know how to unclog a sink, at least.

Wells poured a tall glass of water from a carafe in the refrigerator. Malin would certainly be thirsty when she'd wake up in the evening. He heard a whisper, hoarse with sleep, creeping from the bedroom. "Where have you been? You're late." Pause. "I was waiting for you and fell asleep."

Wells walked toward the bedroom. "I bought you dark chocolate and small olives."

In the room, the briny breeze felt soft on his face, blowing through the open windows. Malin was lying in bed, disheveled, her clothes scattered on the floor around the mattress. She looked at him and lifted the diaphanous linen sheet to leave room for him. She was nude underneath, her thighs smooth and tanned against the pale fabric. Wells walked to the bed, bent over her and kissed her forehead. He could smell the intoxicating scent of her sex. He placed the glass on the small bedside table, next to her.

"Where were you this morning?" Wells asked.

"Come on, now!" she implored, touching his arm. "There'll be plenty of time to talk later."

Wells smiled at her, wriggling himself out of his clothes, knowing that she was right. There would be time. The sheet felt cool and silky on his skin, he could sense the heat radiating from her small body. Malin's breathing slowed down and became more rhythmic. He lay right

behind her, curling his legs a little to make his body fit the contours of hers. He buried his nose in the curve of her neck—a cocktail of the smell of her skin, her perfume and coconut tanning lotion. Wells held Malin from behind and kissed the back of her head.

As a teenager, he had enjoyed those moments—the first few minutes of laying down for a nap or the night—the most. It was the only time when there was nothing else to do but contemplate the day's events, adding color to some of them, giving new meaning to certain other ones; an analysis of the current events of his internal life.

He was so full of youthful passion then that the specific, human incarnation of his love did not really matter. The object of his attention, though ephemeral, would automatically be awarded the leading role in his mental constructions, which were mostly unconcerned with reality. Wells did not care to know these girls he dreamt about; he preferred to carefully build them a personality based on his fantasies and needs of the moment. He understood that reality would never measure up to the perfection he had graced them with, and so the thought sufficed. And when he had truly fallen in love for the first time, with Bea Lipton, the scrawny blonde girl who lived next door to them in Westmount, the feeling had surprised him so that he had not left the house for a couple of days for fear of it slipping away.

Wells turned on his back and lay with his hands clasped under his head. He stared at a crack in the ceiling, like a long snake, stretching from one corner of the room to the outside wall. There was a small woman breathing quietly next to him, and somehow, for once, it was enough, just enough. He turned on his side again, his back to her this time, and smelled her hair over the wet spot on the pillow. Sleep came and washed the shores of his mind.

When Wells awoke, he searched blindly behind him, and his hand touched Malin's back. She did not move, but inhaled deeply. The whitewashed walls had turned a vibrant yellow.

Wells extended an arm over her to reach for the glass of water and took a few pulls. He got up, careful not to disturb her sleep, and went to the window.

The sun had initiated its evening descent behind the mountains, the sea shimmering under the late afternoon light. He turned to look at the small clock on the bedside table and crawled back into bed.

Malin had rolled over on her other side and lay peaceful, facing him. Her face was perfectly still, her muscles loose, only her small ribcage elevating with every breath. Wells moved a strand of hair from her eyes.

There would be at least another hour before the end of their nap. Wells lay there, glad to have woken up before the end of it and happy about the prospect of having all that time to observe Malin's face in these new angles as she lay in bed, the light playing in her hair.

"We're safe until the sound of the alarm clock," he whispered for himself before resting his head down again.

## FOUR

The plane. Damn plane.

The fine print on the ticket in Wells' hand blurred with the bouncing of the car on the rough Athenian road. He tried to make out what gate his flight would leave from. Three? Eight? Wells held out his arm, attempting to steady it in space, hoping that detaching it from the car's recoil would facilitate the reading. He was getting lightheaded, and the ticket had softened between his clammy fingers. He put it back in his pocket.

Wells turned to glance at Malin, next to him, at the wheel; her tongue wedged in the corner of her mouth, elbows bent and hands clasped on the steering wheel, her knuckles whitening: a caricature of herself. She was hunched over, head forward. Weaving through the morning traffic of Athens, Wells regretted that he had asked her to drive. "Don't worry, we'll make it in time," she said.

Wells lifted a hand in her direction. "Let's just try to make it alive, alright?"

The small, battered orange Volkswagen turning into a greenhouse under the late-morning sun. They both rolled down their windows. Malin brushed her face, trying to keep her wild hair out of her eyes. Seeing her hand leave the steering wheel made Wells even more nervous.

"Great, just what I needed," he sighed when the traffic suddenly slowed down to a crawl.

Malin pushed the clutch at the last minute and the engine coughed in staccato. "Calm down. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just hate being stuck in this stupid traffic."

Wells had gotten used to the comfort of having Malin there, close to him. How would he feel away from her, alone? “It seems backwards to me,” he said. “Why do I have to fly across the Atlantic and stand in line to get Greek visa? I am here.”

“You should’ve thought about it before—”

“I know, I know.” He should have thought of applying for a visa before leaving Canada in the first place, but it had been the least of his worries. Ninety days had seemed a long time to travel. And now he was forced to leave. You don’t want to get stuck outside your country with an expired passport.

“It’ll be good,” Malin said. “We’ll appreciate the time together even more after being apart again.”

“I don’t need to be away for that.” He knew Malin could tell he was nervous.

“Contrast is a great teacher,” she said.

Wells hoped Malin was right.

As the car clambered along, the blare of commercial radio leaked out of dozens of cars around them. Wells remembered being astonished, upon first arriving in the country, at how current the Athenian stations were. He had not expected to only hear bouzouki music on the radio, but certainly not to recognize the same dry, bouncy rhythms that animated Chicago’s dance floors either. It had been a disappointment to realize that, although far and remote, this country was linked to the rest of the world to a greater extent than anticipated.

The traffic noises and delirious morning radio banter blurred into a thick and oppressive sound wave; the noise, music and voices, all suddenly distant and indistinct, became hostile. Individual words resonated out of the jumble and echoed relentlessly in Wells’ mind. His calves

started to cramp up. He felt nauseous. Malin asked a question. Wells heard the voice, but could not make out the words. Too much noise, too many voices. Calm down.

“You alright?” Malin asked, now looking worried.

Wells nodded. He took a deep breath in and tried to let the air out slowly, calmly, as if blowing through a straw. The surge of oxygen to his brain made the worry race through his arteries even faster. He could feel droplets of sweat dangling from the hair under his arms. Fuck, he thought. What if I panic? What if I just lose it and can’t get on the plane? What happens then? I’d be deported? He put his head on Malin’s lap, closed his eyes, and as soon as he did, everything started moving again. Wells tried counting backwards from 100 in three’s. Malin worked the stick over his chest. Then he felt her hand on his head, her fingers spread, combing through his damp dark hair delicately. “It’s fine; you’re fine,” she whispered to him.

Wells felt the heat of her thighs, the smoothness of her skin on his cheek. He could smell the apricot-scented cream she rubbed on her legs coming out of the shower.

The VW reluctantly moved forward again. Wells became absorbed by the contrast between Malin’s delicate, perfumed skin and the briskness of her gestures as she operated the car’s pedals. He was almost surprised to feel her small legs move with such speed and force. He lay still until the car stopped again. Wells heard her shut the motor and sit back in her seat. She kissed him on the shoulder.

She helped take the suitcases out of the car and put them on the curb. Wells inspected her face for a shadow of concern or apprehension and saw nothing but a thin smile. He knew she would not come into the airport with him. He knew Malin would not kiss him or say goodbye. She never had. “Thanks for driving me,” he said calmly, offering his arms. Malin put her head

on his chest. Wells could feel the heat from her small body, her heart beating and resonating on his rib cage. “What are you going to do while I’m gone?”

“Read. Relax. Clean the house.”

“See Yiannis?” he asked, instantly regretting the question.

Malin rolled her eyes.

“You will see him when I’m gone though, right?”

“Just make it back OK, will you?”

Wells touched her arm. “Alright, alright. I’m just—”

“I know.”

He made a stumbling attempt at last minute conversation and promised to call soon, but felt her shying away. “Well, good—”

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Say it.”

“What do you want me to—”

Malin gently put her hand on the back of his neck. “Tomorrow. Say ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’”

She got back in the car and drove off without turning to look at him.

The airport, like a giant beehive, seemed unusually busy for a weekday in late September. The building was swarming with tourists, some arriving and some departing, all of them showing the dazed expression of weary travelers.

The frenzy did not do much to settle Wells' increasing nervousness, but he would have to be efficient to make his flight on time. A short line at the check-in desk: good. The busiest counters were, by far, those of small airlines offering discount-priced flights within Europe—people going home to London, Rome or Paris. Nobody spends a week in Corfu and goes back to Peoria, Illinois, nobody.

Sitting at the gate, waiting to board the plane, Wells thought about reading or listening to music, but instead watched discreetly as sunburned fathers walked back and forth, arms loaded with toys and souvenirs, holding their kids' hand. It was easy to tell the ones who had had a fine holiday from the ones who'd secretly sworn that it was *the last time*; that next year, they would just stay home and enjoy the pool. Some parents smiled widely, carrying their kids on their shoulders, parading around in tourist t-shirts, oblivious to the people around them, pointing at everything and talking in loud voices. Other couples walked separated, in silence, as if they'd had a whole week of arguing or yelling at the children and were now even more exhausted than they had been before the trip. They walked slowly, hunched over, their children trailing behind, yelling, until both parents turned around, coming back to life for a brief instant to scream sharply for them to keep quiet.

Wells saw a young woman with short, dark hair pushing a stroller. The little girl sitting in it tilted her head and stared at the fluorescent lights above with her brown and glossy eyes. She asked the woman a question in a Latin language Wells could not understand. The woman answered softly. The little girl smiled and laughed quietly, her face bright with joy. Wells wondered where they were from.

The woman was not beautiful with her coarse facial features, sharp jaw line and woolly hair. She walked back and forth, probably just pushing the stroller around to keep the child from



the tediousness of waiting at their gate. There in the crowded airport, she smoothed out her dress carefully. The motion of her hand on her stomach and thighs, the smoothness of her movements all felt familiar to Wells. He could not decide whether she reminded him of someone he knew—maybe his mother—or if her rhythm just resonated with something in him. He could understand the moving of her face as she spoke or smiled, her face taut with tenderness for her child. It was all in the way her body moved, in the tone of her voice.

She doesn't even know I'm here, Wells thought, an ordinary man sitting alone, observing her. Wells wondered about the woman's life at home. He tried to imagine her house—the color of its shutters, the smell of the vestibule when coming from outside—tried to picture the face of her husband.

These hundreds of people surrounding him, everywhere, all these people had lives outside of the coincidence of their simultaneous presence in that airport. All these people—even the ones he hadn't set eyes upon yet—had names, they had friends and relatives. This overwhelmed him.

His mind was racing. What about this man... and that one? Wells wondered. What an incredible cosmic farce that they would be there together. It felt so random, so unlikely that such distant paths would intersect at this one point in time and space. Wells pictured his life and theirs; series of lines going in millions of directions, some of them interconnected, some of them infinitely distant, but all of them crossing in one point: now. He couldn't help but think that some of these lines had to have crossed before or would likely cross again, even if only by simple statistical probability. Did these people know? Had they noticed?

Wells wondered if he would ever see that woman again, if maybe he'd just walk by her one day in Boston or Barcelona without even realizing it. Maybe he'd visit her town without

knowing. Maybe he'd have coffee at her favorite café and sit in her usual seat. Nobody would notice or say anything. And what of the people he would never meet, the ones he would just always come close to? How many asymptotic relationships do we all have?

A knot settled in Wells' abdomen. He felt small beyond words. I am not going to make it, he thought. I might die before I can even board the flight. His heart began racing faster again and missed the occasional beat. He heard the sound of blood rushing to his ears and felt his lobes heat up like burning light bulbs. A loud, obnoxious voice announced the last call for travelers on the flight to Montreal.

When Wells took his seat, the lady sitting next to him got up and decided to take one of the empty seats at the front instead. OK, he said to himself. I can sit quietly and try to sleep. Wells took a quick look at the man in his row, assessing the potential danger for tedious and unwanted conversation. He didn't feel like looking at a set of wallet-size family pictures, neck twisted for eight hours. This is too long of a flight to take that kind of risk, he thought. When the plane took off, he lowered his seat and closed his eyes.

Wells thought of Malin and tried to picture her driving back through traffic and on to the ferry station to wait for the boat—unless she decided to stay in Athens for the night. Maybe she'd visit Aley. Maybe Yiannis would be there. A shot of adrenalin made him hot. I'm losing it, he thought.

He tried to occupy his mind by remembering a question a student had asked him a long time ago: why is  $0^0=1$ ? Basic, yet paradoxical:  $a^0$  is always 1, but  $0^a$  is always 0. The student hadn't understood the interest of defining the indeterminate, in this case. Wells struggled to recall the elegant Kogan formula this allowed for a general sinc function.

$$\int_0^\infty \frac{\sin^a x}{x^b} dx = \frac{\pi^{1-c} (-1)^{\lfloor (a-b)/2 \rfloor}}{2^{a-c} (b-1)!} \sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor a/2 \rfloor - c} (-1)^k \binom{a}{k} (\alpha - 2k)^{b-1} [\ln(\alpha - 2k)]^c$$

He fell asleep trying to visualize this.

Wells woke up intermittently: the stewardess offering drinks; the man next to him snoring; through the window, the Atlantic below. And in between these things, half-formed dreams of Malin. Wells only really woke up when the plane hit ground.

The light coming through the small, oval windows was bright and warm. It looked to be about noon in Montreal. Wells felt exhausted from the nervousness.

Entering the lobby of the arrival terminal with his luggage, Wells was briefly assailed by so many pairs of eyes. He looked around at the families huddled against the fence, children challenging each other to spot a relative through the closing slit of the glass doors. That is love; waiting for someone at the airport with this look of excitement, of expectation. He took a deep breath and walked outside.

On the sidewalk, people were running, cell phone in one hand, suitcase in the other. Others just walked around alone, talking in loud voices into their hidden microphones, looking slightly insane, as if engaged in a drawn-out conversation with themselves. It was a dizzying chaos that surrounded him. Greece on speed. He had to stop for a moment to collect himself, his chest still feeling compressed from the pressure of the plane, his breathing rapid and shallow, his stomach uneasy. Calm down, Wells thought. He crossed the street to find a telephone booth and dialed his father's office number.

"You've reached Gary Oliver, I'm either out of the office or on another call, please leave a message." Then, in broken French, "*Ici Gary Oliver, je ne suis pas disponible, laissez-moi votre message.*" Later, Wells decided, and hung up.

“*Vous allez où?*” the taxi driver asked, staring at the radio, listening to a distant voice running through the baseball scores in French.

Wells fumbled for words, “*Euh, je voudrais—*”

“Where to?” the driver asked again, this time lifting his head to look at Wells in the rear-view mirror.

“McGill University, main entrance to the campus.”

The man nodded as he put the car in gear, waved at the other drivers parked in line behind him, and drove off.

The blue vinyl seat of the Crown Victoria felt hot and sticky against Wells’ arms. The driver weaved through traffic to reach highway 20 in the direction of the downtown core where circulation slowed again.

Wells had not yet taken inventory of his immediate surroundings—this new car, this country—and was already overwhelmed by the speed of life around him. Even in gridlock, traffic things seemed to be moving faster than he could handle. He could hear thumping bass sounds rattling the back windows of shiny cars, over-zealous announcers’ sales pitches, car mufflers modified so as to sound like jet plane engines, a smorgasbord of hip-hop beats peppered with half-spoken lyrics uttered in a vernacular too trendy and exclusive for Wells to grasp. All around them, people were talking: on phones, to themselves or to one another, yelling at other drivers from their windows and honking mindlessly at the cars in front of them. Wells lowered himself in the seat. “Isn’t it a bit late in the year for it to be this hot?” he asked cautiously, not meaning to bother the driver, but hoping that conversation would distract him from the ebb and flow of his nervous nausea.

The man nodded, looking as if he'd been intending to say something about the heat, and turned off the radio. "It'll be snowing before we know it, though," he said. "Where' you from?"

"Here," Wells answered. "Westmount."

"Ooohh," the driver laughed. "I bet you needed a vacation very badly."

Wells looked at the driver's face in the rearview mirror. Was he kidding? "My parents are... I mean, I don't live here."

"But I'm sure you're working really hard. And struggling."

"Listen who do you think you—"

The driver turned to look at Wells. "They need cab drivers over where you're coming from?" He smiled.

Wells turned to look outside. The road signs appeared overly green. The air smelled of tar and fresh asphalt. "Highway looks better," he said.

"Damn well better. All they ever do is work on her year-round. And not at night either. Right in the middle of rush hour on a Monday or Friday."

Wells detected the slightest trace of a French accent in the man's English. This made him realize he was home.

The driver dropped him off at the gated entrance of the University and wished him a nice stay in the city. He flung a hurried *Salut* through his opened window as the large car disappeared into the afternoon traffic of Sherbrooke Street. A disappointing arrival into the city, Wells thought. The drive from the airport is definitely not the way to get the best first impression.

He headed toward Burnside Hall and thought about going in, but walked back across the campus lawn haphazardly, carrying his bag. Nothing's changed, he thought. You can leave for years, and nothing ever changes. Even the old apple tree across from Leakey hall looked the

same. The sweet and pungent smell of rotting apples reached his nose as he climbed the concrete stairs toward Dr. Penfield Street. He smiled at a few students sitting in circles, studying and eating lunch.

Wells later checked into the *Méridien*, a small, but nice establishment that looked like it had formerly been a luxurious apartment complex.

The old room was rather agreeable with its pale blue walls and gossamer curtains. Wells opened his suitcase on the bed and sat at the small table next to the television set. He took the notepad and the pen and decided to write to Malin. He felt drowsy. He thought about calling her, but decided against it. Much too soon. Wells pushed the paper aside.

## FIVE

Through the open window, the bitter smell of black coffee and the regular cadence of high-heels drifted in the room and awakened Wells. He stared at the clock on the bedside table, trying to shake off the sleep. An infomercial for hair in a spray can was playing on the television, louder, it seemed, than the volume had been when he had fallen asleep. He hurried to get ready.

*“Bonne journée monsieur!”* said the pimply young man who opened the outside door, then that of the first taxi waiting in line.

*“Merci.”*

“Where you going?” the driver asked.

“Greek Consulate, place Frère André.”

Barely eight-thirty, and the line reached back to the steps outside. The woman on the phone had advised to come early, especially on Fridays. Wells had stood in line to fly halfway across the world for the privilege of standing in another line. What rot.

“Can you believe that’s what our money buys?”

“Excuse me,” Wells said.

“Our taxes,” the man standing in front of him said in halting English. “That’s the kind of service our taxes go towards. Waiting like cattle in a pen.”

Wells nodded. The man smoothed his thin mustache between two fingers, then brushed the padded shoulders of his jacket absent-mindedly.

“Passport problems?” Wells asked.

“Yes. My daughter she is living here in Montreal. She just had a child, and I want to stay to help her.”

“That’s nice.”

“You, you are living in Greece?”

“Yes,” Wells said. “In Kythera.”

The man nodded enthusiastically. “You do like Greece better than Canada, do you?”

“I really like it.”

“My daughter she doesn’t understand that. One day she will see and want to come home.”

“Montreal is a good city,” Wells said. “It is faster—much faster—but she is safe here. Maybe she needed some change. Change is scary, but sometimes necessary.”

The man lowered his voice. “You asked someone to fill out a false employment offer?”

Wells smiled and the man gave him a thumbs up.

Walking out of the building, almost two hours later, the day suddenly felt unbearably full of promise. It was sunny and warm and the city sprawled ahead of Wells for miles. This time he was a visitor, a tourist. He could take in whatever he chose to and not worry about anything. And knowing that there was a seat waiting for him on the plane Monday morning somehow felt thoroughly liberating.

He set out west, on René-Lévesque, and after a while, craving a bit more activity, moved up to Ste-Catherine’s. The sidewalks crawled with people: tall men in pressed business suits, Italian tailors smoking cigars, leaning on their storefronts, kids on skateboards, carefully coordinated women in short skirts and dizzying heels. Wells felt a jolt of excitement. His city.



Home is where you first start dreaming. Wells knew this. Bea Lipton, McGill, the tall Indian girl with perfect legs at the tennis club, Malin even: Montreal. He thought of Anna. How long had it been? Two years? Wells wondered what she would look like now, what she could be doing. Probably teaching somewhere. Once he started wondering, Wells knew he would call. How could he not? He was in the same city and could suddenly almost feel her there. It'd be impolite not to check in, he thought. He looked for a payphone with a phonebook not stolen or charred until he realized that maybe, just maybe, she could have gotten married. Kids even, maybe. This made him stop in his tracks, choking on an unexpected spell of melancholy.

“Titties?”

Wells looked at the man standing next to him, in front of a gaping doorway revealing a darkened, climbing staircase.

“Pardon?”

“You like titties?” the man said, this time a tad more insistently. “Two girls eating each other out upstairs.” He pointed up.

“Thanks,” Wells said, walking off. He turned back a few steps on.

“Titties, nice, big titties,” he heard the man whisper again in a duplicitous tone, but with unmistakably suggestive eyes to a group of businessmen who instantly exploded in embarrassed laughter. Then the strip club barker turned to a man who appeared in the doorway. “Have a good day, sir,” he said.

The old man ignored him and crossed the street swiftly, his greyish, close-cropped hair disappearing into the crowd. There was no mistaking the stooped silhouette, the hair. But how could it be? Could he and Cohen both have flown home on the same plane? Wells stared at the

moving mass of pedestrians across Ste-Catherine's and suddenly the grey head reappeared. Wells started off, following the man at a distance.

How momentous that they would both be in the same city—on the same street, even—twice in the same week. He thought that Leonard (was he calling him Leonard already?) would surely find this humorous, if not downright fascinating. After all, he was a man of fate and coincidences.

They both kept walking west, Wells trailing behind. The man across the street suddenly seemed in more of a hurry. I bet he's going to visit his childhood home, Wells thought, Cohen's parents' house on Belmont Street being a kind of landmark in Westmount. He mentally mapped out the directions to the house from where he stood, trying to triangulate a shortcut through the McGill campus or up Côte-des-Neiges, but decided he risked taking even more time. Wells wanted to get there before Cohen would and walk by him to break the ice, not run up from behind and startle him. A bad way to make a first impression. He moved up Peel Street and went into the metro station.

Two hours into the flight, somewhere over the Atlantic, Wells had pointed at Malin's CD player. "What's in there?"

"He's—well, you'd know Leonard Cohen."

"Love Cohen. He's from Montreal," he said.

They had been talking since London. Wells did not want the plane to land. If only the pilot could get lost, or just lose his mind and decide to turn back. Something. "How long are you going to be in Chicago?" Wells said.

"Ten days. I'll probably be sick of my mother after three. You know how that is."

“You love missing her.”

Malin look at him and smiled. “Exactly.”

The recycled air of the plane smelled like mentholated muscle cream and powdery perfume. Wells tried to make out her smell through it, but couldn’t. He began to lean in a bit closer when talking, as if to emphasize certain points, hoping to catch a draft of perfume, shampoo, sweat even. Anything to seal the memory.

When Malin talked, Wells stared at her, self-conscious that she’d notice he was tracing imaginary lines from the commissures of her mouth, to her small ears, to her blue eyes and back down. Malin did not seem bothered by the closeness. She listened better than anyone had in a long time, probably since Anna. And she liked Cohen.

When Wells emerged from the darkness of the station at Atwater, he hurried up the street thinking that, with luck, he’d probably reach Belmont in time to start walking from the opposite end and meet Cohen halfway.

At Montrose, he stopped and looked north, but with no one in sight, sat down on the curb. He could’ve been in an English village; the houses around were old and beautiful, all dark brick and steep roofs stained with washed out copper, and the street peaceful and clean. Waiting there, it all suddenly seemed a bit ridiculous. No matter how much Wells felt he knew Cohen from having read and listened to so much of what the man had written and recorded, he also understood that this was not reciprocal. He would likely come off as a nothing more than an over-zealous fan. But so what? Hopefully the poet could help him sort through a lot with just a few words. He knew what it meant to leave home and what life on a Greek island was. He

understood what it meant to lose the sense of home, to live in between countries. Cohen had been away for so long, had traveled so much.

In an interview Wells had once read, Cohen was quoted as saying that, given the choice, he would always leave a woman rather than sacrifice his art. That, above everything, fascinated Wells. He admired this dedication, this unwaveringness. That is what he wanted to get at. Had Cohen just not found the right woman, or was Wells too ambitious in his relationships? And would this ubiquitous longing for the memories of a home that was no more remain forever? Cohen would know. What's more, Wells thought, if the rumours of his financial difficulties are accurate, then maybe I could return the favour by helping him out. Maybe I can lend him some money in exchange for his guidance. That would be easier on his dignity as well.

After a few more minutes and still not a sign, Wells began to have doubts. Maybe Cohen had stopped at Murray Hill on the way to sit in the park. He walked hurriedly, glancing up every street, hoping to see someone, just anyone. What the hell? He ran down Sydenham Street, then back up and, out of breath, stood facing a tall, red-brick house. The brass knocker glittered against the white of the lacquered door. Wells' mother's silver Jaguar was parked in the driveway, the two front tires low on pressure, as usual.

It felt strange, almost scary to look at the house as any other on that tree-lined avenue. Nothing about its grey roof, large bright windows and stone foundations differentiated it from the others. Nothing but memories.

If Wells closed his eyes, he could smell the kitchen in the morning, hear his father's stubborn attempts at teaching himself electric guitar in the attic; whiny, uneven notes rattling in the drum kit snare. It all came back in flashes: the upturned wine glasses reflected in the

mirrored back panel of the grand armoire, the cold porcelain of the old bathtub, the bedroom door that always swung open. Everything that had happened there.

He thought about going in. The spare key would certainly still be waiting for him, taped underneath the mailbox. But with his father at the office and his mother away, the thought of the empty house seemed daunting. Everything is going so well for me, he thought. I don't want to jinx it. The smell of his bedroom, of the waxed stone floor in the entrance hall would be enough to make him nostalgic. And later, his father would get on trying to convince him to move back.

Malin would criticize him for walking off, and his father would certainly be angry, or maybe more disappointed, but only if they knew. No sense telling either, he decided. Besides, Sunday morning would be a better time to visit if he chose to.

Glancing across the street he saw the tall, square mailbox. He remembered sitting there, next to it on the curb, with Anna. Years ago already, he thought. Years. He slipped out of the house late at night, then, to go knock on her bedroom window, and they walked the streets, arm in arm, like two kids. Why hadn't Wells wanted people to know they were together for the first year? It seemed so childish, so melodramatic now. With time, all his memories of Anna had turned lovely, or at least pleasant. He sometimes still missed these walks through the city, the smells, the energy. Malin wasn't one for walking. She always wore heels and preferred sitting in cafés or shopping. Anna probably could've run a marathon then. More often than not, Wells showed signs of fatigue before she did. And then they walked back to that spot on the curb, next to the mailbox, where they talked for a while or ate lichees they had bought at the 24-hour Asian grocery store downtown until they could no longer keep their eyes open. Such crazy, ridiculous passion in young love. Quite beautiful, really.

After Anna had left him, Wells had more than once argued with his father about the merits of staying with the same woman for the rest of one's life. The man could be stubborn about certain things, and this certainly was one of them. He felt this was the ideal situation: meeting someone in adolescence and committing to a relationship early on. Incredibly old-fashioned. So old fashioned, in fact, that nobody else Wells knew had succeeded in turning that scenario into reality. In the US, where this still happened, his parents would have been called "high-school sweethearts". Here, there were no expressions still in use to describe them.

So Wells had always stuck with the defence that you can't really know what's good for you until you've experienced what's available to you; a theory he had developed to try to find the positive side to Anna's absence. Cohen would undoubtedly have agreed. After all, what was his father trying to do? It hadn't been Wells' decision to end the relationship. He had done everything he could to make it work, except maybe to leave for Chicago. But she could have followed. Or was that a mistake on his part?

For the first time, Wells thought that maybe his father had had a point. No one can fully open up beyond the first heartbreak. If you don't know how badly you can be hurt, you have no reason to fear. For all his wisdom, his father had never suffered the emptiness of separation, of loss. His marriage was just another one in a long line of successes. Everything he touched worked.

At the hotel, Wells climbed the stairs and threw himself on the bed. The sheets were fresh and crisp, and the slight mustiness of the room was gone, now replaced by the unmistakable scent of fall. He felt lonely.

He picked up the phone. “This is Wells Oliver in 307. Could you please give me a listing for Anna Clarke.”

## SIX

The next day at noon Wells walked behind a small group of neatly dressed business-types heading downtown for lunch. The men discussed the financial market, hockey scores and television shows. Like atoms of a same molecule, the men moved away from each other, then closer again while talking, as if bound by chemical bonds.

A few meters from the McGill gate, Wells saw Anna sitting on a freestanding structure that looked like a set of large stairs carved out of a giant concrete block, in the middle of the campus lawn, which the students used as benches. He stared at her from a distance.

The woman's curly brown hair, turning blonde in strands, fell over her shoulders and onto the book she was holding close to her face. She stopped reading as Wells approached and put her book in a leather bag.

"Excuse me," he said, a little loudly.

"Yes," she answered, turning around. She stared at him straight-faced.

"Hey."

Anna stood up, opened her arms and hugged him.

"Thank God it's you. I was getting nervous there for a moment," Wells said. Same warm eyes, same smile, same perfume, he thought.

"I saw your brother a couple weeks ago, I forgot to tell you on the phone yesterday. Seen him yet?"

"I know, he told me," Wells said, "but he went to Victoria with my mother to visit my grandma, and I didn't tell anyone I was coming."

"Why not?" Anna asked.



“Another long story. Let’s go somewhere.”

Wells followed Anna to a black, convertible BMW. She went around it and unlocked the door with the remote on her key chain.

“This is your car?” Wells asked, incredulous.

“What?”

“You drive a convertible? A BMW?”

Nothing.

“That’s so unlike you... It’s...”

Anna seemed amused. “Just get in,” she said.

The black leather seats of the BMW were almost burning to the touch. “It’s been so hot here these past few days, it’s insane,” Anna said matter-of-factly. “Winters grow colder and summers hotter.” She paused for a moment. “Or maybe I’m just getting older.”

She put the car in gear, then pulled onto Sherbrooke and down toward the highway. Once she got onto Décarie, Anna stepped on the accelerator. Wells felt the pull of the car as the wind screamed through the open windows. The wheels hitting the cracked pavement gave a regular, lulling bounce to the car. He started to relax.

“So,” Anna said, turning to him and smiling, “tell me everything.”

“Sure. But why don’t *you* start by telling me whose car this is.”

“It’s *my* damn car. What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m sorry,” Wells said. “It’s just kind of a shock to see you driving this.”

“Yeah, well. Did you think I’d stay 24 forever?”

“You’re right. Sorry. So, OK, I met this woman a while ago, in London.”

Wells told her about the flight, the drawn-out phone conversations that ensued and the subsequent move to Greece. Anna listened attentively while driving, apparently interested in the details of the story.

“Greece?” She turned to Wells. “And Daddy pays for everything.”

“I still have money left over from Chicago.”

Anna shook her head.

“What?” Wells asked.

“Nothing.”

They drove on through the steamy city. The sunken expressway stretched out ahead of them, its exits branching out like nerve roots from a spine. Anna turned and the car clambered up to street level before coming to a halt at the first intersection. On the pedestrian avenue, across the street from them, two teenagers wore sunglasses and walked hand in hand. Hispanic kids stood around in circles, bouncing a soccer ball on their heads, feet and thighs, while other people gathered around a street musician playing guitar and singing. A dishevelled man was reading out loud from a battered poetry book while people walked by him without so much as a side-glance. When the light turned, they drove past a few cafés where people sat at outdoor tables with their backpacks, and a couple of passers-by stopped to exchange a few words with the shop customers.

Anna parked the car in an alleyway between two old Victorian houses. “There,” she said, pointing to the larger of the two houses. “Second floor.”

Wells walked out of the alley and stood in front of the building, taking in the elegance of its shape, the pureness of its lines.

“It used to look like a gingerbread house—yellow and red—before, but the landlord finally had it painted like this. What do you think?”

“It looks great now,” Wells said. “Blue with white shutters; nice.” He turned and glanced down the long, quiet, tree-lined avenue. Malin would love this, he thought.

“Come on up,” Anna said.

The narrow, creaking staircase opened directly onto Anna’s living room. Despite its small size, or perhaps because of it, the room was inviting with its harmoniously coordinated drapes and sofas. This time, Wells tried to brush away the surprise. “How long have you been living here?” he asked while Anna busied herself in the kitchen.

“Four, five months,” she answered. “Want a drink?”

“Please. Where did you live before?”

“With my boyfriend.”

“Where’s he now?” Wells asked.

Anna walked back into the living room and offered him a glass of iced tea. “Don’t know,” she said. “Probably back in the Townships.”

“That’s where he’s from?”

“He works at the hospital there,” she said.

Wells could tell that the wound had not yet completely cauterized. Anna was starting to sound a little annoyed by the questions. “I’m sorry,” Wells offered, “I’m just curious.”

“That’s OK, I’ve just not been thinking about it, really.”

“Doing alright, though?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Do you miss him?” Wells asked.

“It’s funny, I don’t. I think sometimes we forget that it’s so much better to be alone than to have to make all the sacrifices that are implicit in a relationship, unless the benefits truly outweigh them.”

Wells took a sip from his drink. The tartness of the lemon made his mouth water. He looked at Anna and wondered if his astonishment at her composure, the apparent structure of her life, stemmed from the fact that she had changed so little, physically, since the last time he had seen her. She just dresses differently, he thought. “Did you feel that way when we were together?” Wells asked, trying to sound unconcerned.

“Come on...”

“I’m just asking,” he said. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s been so long.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Sometimes,” Wells lied.

“I mean, I finished my Ph.D. after you left,” she said, “and I started teaching full time at the University right after. Between McGill and relationships, I felt like I hadn’t had a minute to myself in years. Down time feels right. It feels good right now.”

Wells nodded pensively. He admired Anna’s fortitude, but remembered how difficult it had been to let go after she had left him, how painful it had been to see her suddenly become so detached, so nonchalant. He felt sympathy for the man she was talking about, though he certainly was glad not to have to put a face to the idea of him. “Are you going to show me the rest of the place?” he said, changing the subject.

“Not before you tell me more about this woman.”

“What do you want to know?” Wells asked.

“You’re not going to volunteer... Let’s see... How old is she? Our age?”

“A few years younger.”

“What does she look like? Blonde with blue eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“How tall?”

Wells understood that this had suddenly become a competition, barely hidden under the thin veil of curiosity. He debated whether or not to go for the full effect, but decided that careful restraint was preferable.

“You know I’m terrible at trying to guess height.”

“Shorter than me?”

“Yeah. Shorter than you.”

Anna seemed pleased.

“She’s pretty?” she asked.

“Of course I’m going to say yes, I wouldn’t be with her otherwise, right?”

“She must be pretty,” Anna said, as if talking to herself.

That one hurt, Wells thought. But instead of feeling satisfaction, he sympathized with her sullenness.

The hours flew by. Anna put on a few CDs of the chamber music quartet she played in. They discussed this, then talked some more, looked at pictures, even began to watch a movie together. The tension eased a little, but Wells could still feel it. So much history.

Anna seemed to tire after a while. “I need to get some things done today. Why don’t I drop you back off?” she said. “You can go to the car, I’ll be down in a minute.”

Wells nodded in agreement and headed down the stairs slowly. He stopped halfway and turned around to carefully look at the living room. Will I ever see this place again? he wondered.

They drove back in near silence. The sky had begun to darken, threatening to open up and pour everything it held. Anna pulled up across the street from the University's gated main entrance.

"There you go," she said.

"It was good to see you, Anna," Wells said.

"I know."

Wells hesitated. "You want to—What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I have to run some errands for Monday. Aren't you going to see your father?"

"I am, but I'm not doing anything after. You want to go for dinner or something?"

She seemed to think for a second. "Just call me when you're done, and I'll see where I am with things."

"OK."

"See you later," she said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

Wells breathed in her perfume and, getting out of the car, couldn't help but think about how, after three years together, she had decided not to follow him to Chicago.

Anna had given little in the way of explanation; she just didn't think it was the right thing for them to do, wasn't ready to make the commitment that she felt living together implied. And although this had not completely surprised Wells, who had guessed it would come, it still broke his heart because he loved her fiercely and, he was sure, she loved him back.

But Anna was just starting her Ph.D. then, and she went out with friends almost every night, usually having too many cocktails—scarcely to the point of stumbling disgrace, as hers was an elegance that seemed all but flawless to Wells, but often enough to keep her up too late and in bed until she had to go to McGill in the early afternoon. For many months, as he tried to

get used to Chicago, Wells remained convinced that their separation was a technical glitch in the greater plan of their life together, that Anna would one day realize her mistake, pack up and come join him in Illinois. But this never happened, and the pain of the disappointment plagued his daily life for many more months, even into the beginning of his relationship with Malin, in turn keeping him from making any commitments, lest he would miss out on Anna's long-awaited return. But with Malin, against all expectation, these feelings had slowly begun to fade until Wells woke up one morning and not only could he not feel the pain anymore, but he did not even miss it.

Wells's mind raced between Greece and Canada, between Kythera and Montreal, Malin and Anna. He thought that Malin was probably out at this time, having drinks with a few friends, or maybe at Gabriella's, watching a movie. Anna's not for me, not what I need, Wells told himself, her perfume still in his nose as he walked again toward Sherbrooke Street. She's selfish and difficult.

The air smelled of ozone, and the pavement was blotchy with large, dark spots. Strangely, he hadn't noticed the rain from the car, but it looked as if it had just let up. Wells crossed the street and started down McGill College Avenue, its expansive sidewalks and terraces slowly filling up again after the shower, though considerably less busy than during the frenzy of weekday lunch hour. In the centre of the avenue, between the small apple trees beginning to bear fruit, white chrysanthemums and tall, pink peonies poked between the thick hosta leaves, heavy with drops of rain.

Wells was hungry, and he decided to turn on Sainte-Catherine's, the heart of downtown. After a few blocks, he began to feel as if he were walking against traffic. He glanced across the street, but the overall movement of the crowd there also seemed directed eastward.

Wells stopped in front of the large display window of a bookstore and stared at the books that were laid out on violet taffeta, sparkling with glitter. He could not recognize any of the titles—French or English—of any of the books. He scanned the displays at the front of the store anxiously, hoping to catch a glimpse of a familiar title or cover. Everything was foreign to him. He remained, paralyzed, staring at *La Séparation, Mais à Quel Prix?*, wondering how many people before him had stood where he now did, how many eyes had settled on the same book. His breathing quickened; he was hot. Wells turned his gaze to the sidewalk again, and it suddenly seemed twice as crowded. Waves of people rushed toward him before passing and disappearing behind, strange faces coming into focus and fading out like a slide show tray spinning out of control wildly. He could feel his pulse in his neck, groin and arms. He felt dizzy and nauseated. He extended an arm and reached for the closest wall. He touched a woman with his hand.

“*Eille*,” she said, stepping aside.

“Sorry,” Wells offered apologetically.

The woman nodded to him, looking embarrassed by her overly dramatic reaction.

The polished granite wall, when he reached it, felt cool on Wells’ hand. He tried to steady himself, but felt his knees weaken. He lowered himself to the ground and sat with his back to the smooth wall. Nobody seemed to notice; people kept walking by, their glance gliding over as if nothing would stick to him. A tall man wearing a dark suit and sunglasses stared at him without breaking stride, all the while talking on the phone. Not here, Wells thought, God please, not here.



He thought about calling Anna from the pay phone inside the store but decided against it. Too embarrassing. His father? His eyelids were heavy. He flexed his knees and lowered his head to them, doing his best to brush off the incessant drone of the crowd.

When he opened his eyes, Wells was unsure of whether he had fallen asleep for a moment. He felt marginally better and so decided he should try to force a little food down. He stood up slowly, one hand still using the wall for balance.

He started walking again slowly. The distinct aroma of charcoal and roasting meat made him hungry. He went in a narrow restaurant with a sign in its front window boasting its smoked-meat was the best in the city. Wells entered, expecting to see the old woman he knew behind the counter, but in her place was a girl, maybe half the other woman's age, wiping the formica counter in silence. He sat on a stool, and the woman nodded to him mechanically as she put a paper placemat, silverware and a menu on the table. Wells ordered a smoked-meat sandwich, lean, with a side of fries, coleslaw and a small cherry coke. The woman smiled and nodded, then pulled a glass bottle from a small refrigerator under the counter and placed it in front of him with two straws. She turned and mumbled the order to an older man in an apron who stood at the other end of the restaurant, watching baseball on a muted television set.

Wells got up and fetched a newspaper. The walls of the restaurant were lined with small, square picture frames, most of them very old, showing a diminutive man in a suit, probably the owner of the restaurant, with various celebrities: Milton Berle, Muhamed Ali, Miles Davis, Dean Martin and many others. There was also a picture of the same man with Leonard Cohen that looked like it dated from the seventies. Wells made a mental note of telling Malin about it as he walked back to his seat. He sat skimming through the paper until his order came.

He ate quickly, realizing that he had not had smoked-meat in a long time. The rye bread was just moist enough with the steam of the hot meat.

Jetlag finally caught up with Wells as he finished his fries, and his eyes began to close again. Even the sugar and the caffeine of the soda did little to shake him awake.

The young man who had held the door at the hotel, in the morning, was not there; instead, an older, more official-looking concierge stood in front of the building. He touched his hat and opened the door as soon as Wells left the sidewalk. The clock in the lobby indicated seven thirty. Too late to call Malin, Wells thought, climbing the stairs to his room.

Heading out that morning, he had not shut the window. He walked to it and looked out. A young valet from the smaller but nicer hotel across the street was nervously trying to fit a shiny Aston Martin in a parking space just a few inches longer than the car. Climbing behind that establishment, Côte-des-Neiges and the Montreal General Hospital perched high above, overlooking the city. Looming above that still, atop Mount-Royal in the distance, the large mansions of Westmount kept watch over the low city and the proletarian thin-walled efficiencies of Pointe Saint-Charles, the cold and dank subsidized studios of Saint-Henry where large families shared two rooms between seven or eight people, where Colombian doctors were forced to drive cabs around the poorer neighbourhoods to provide for their family, and Haitian engineers had to sell donuts at minimum wage to make ends meet.

My father grew up there, Wells thought, amid the squalor of the low city. His entire life, he has made every decision with this in mind, making sure that his family would never have to go through what he did. But he doesn't realize that we're safe now; he just keeps ploughing ahead relentlessly as if, at any moment, the rug could be pulled from under his feet. He's kept

his promise: After leaving St-Henry, he never again set foot in it, as if fearing re-contamination. Ironically, Wells now realized, reaching the highest corporate spheres, in Montreal, also implies living in Westmount, a mere few blocks up from where he was born, St-Henry staring at him from below, reminding him or perhaps threatening that he will never be completely free from its grip.

Wells sat on the bed and tried to read but was far too tired to be efficient. With every passing minute, the small room grew darker as the sun faded on the horizon. Wells turned on the bedside lamp but turned it off a few minutes later, pushed the comforter to the floor and slipped under the flat sheet. He fell asleep almost instantly.

“Where are you going?” asked the old man sitting next to Wells on the plane.

“I don’t know...”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You bought the ticket, didn’t you?”

“Where are *you* going?” Wells asked back. “We’re on the same flight.”

“I’m going home,” the man said.

Wells felt a jolt going through him. He sat up in bed, sweating, and looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was 3:15 AM. He picked up the phone.

“Réception, front desk,” the receptionist answered groggily.

“I need to make a long distance call.”

“Sure, the number, sir?”

He gave her the number. There was a slight pause, then a click, and the woman’s voice came again.

“Patching you through, sir.”

“Thanks.”

The phone rang once, twice, three times, and Wells’ expectations started to dampen. With the size of the flat, Malin could not be very far from the phone. But then the ringing was replaced by a short silence, and he heard Malin struggle with the receiver. “Hello, Malin.”

“Hey,” Wells said excitedly.

“Hey. What time is it for you? Early, right?”

“Sounds like you’re still sleeping... How are you?”

Malin took a moment to answer. “Just woke up.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to.”

“No, no, that’s OK,” Malin said.

“So what have you been up to?”

“Stop. Tell me about the trip. How’s everything?”

“It’s fine,” he said.

“Did you get the visa?”

Wells turned in bed. “I asked them to rush it. Had to pay extra, but it should be ready for me right before I have to fly back.”

“Good. Seen anybody you know?”

Wells hoped she wouldn’t ask about his family. “Not yet”

“Well, what else then?”

“It’s good to hear you,” Wells said. “It makes me miss you like every night last year.”

“I know. How was the flight?”

“I got pretty nervous when I boarded, but I ended up sleeping a lot. The flight out of Heathrow was fine. I don’t know; it always seems to be the first one that freaks me out.”

“I should get going,” Malin said. “I have to meet Gabriella. Get to bed. Being tired will do you no good.”

“OK, just wanted to say hi.”

“I’m glad you called. Good—”

Wells did not want to let her go. The voice on the other end of the line felt like the connection to his new life, to himself. He wanted to tell her that he missed her, that he loved her, that he needed her. “Mal?”

“Hmmm.”

“Can I tell you something, something I’ve never told you before?”

“Sure.”

“Do you remember our first week in Athens, the afternoon we sat in that terrible Chinese restaurant, drinking tea?” Wells asked.

“Of course.”

“I was just getting accustomed to the lines in your hands, to seeing your face move when you speak. We talked about the year Olof Palme was gunned down and how you remembered being seven or eight then and still living in Stockholm. Remember?”

“Yes,” she said.

“You told me about that windy autumn and how you would sneak out of the house to walk to the shore by yourself and stand there, arms outstretched and eyes closed, hoping to be swept away by the gale.”

“The ocean wind is so strong sometimes,” Malin said.

“Here’s my secret,” Wells continued, ignoring this, “the beauty of the image this conjured up in my mind made me realize, right then, that I wanted to be with you. Wanted it for a long time.”

“Stop. We can’t have this talk over the phone; not now, not anymore. Write it down if you have to. I want to be sitting in front of you for this.”

“I know. It’s late. I just wanted to tell you.”

“I’m glad, it’s just that—”

“I know.”

“Is everything OK?” Malin asked.

“Yeah, why? You?”

“Mmm. I’ll talk to you soon, OK?”

“Yeah. Goodnight. Love you.”

“Me too, goodnight.”

Wells hung up the phone. Malin’s voice sounded different, distant. She’s tired from the trip back from Athens, he thought. He lay back down and fell asleep again.

## SEVEN

When Wells walked out of the movie theatre on Sunday morning, his shoulder muscles loosened, and he took a deep breath. The air smelled of lilac. It was hot and sunny, and he did not feel like going to the restaurant for the obligatory brunch with his father. He pulled Anna's number from his wallet. Just one more day and he would be back in Kythera.

Wells did not expect her to be home, but she picked up on the second ring. "Want to spend the afternoon with?"

She seemed to hesitate. "Where are you?"

"Downtown. I can meet you anywhere."

"Well, you can stay there. I'll pick you up. Or maybe—Do you mind walking to that parking on Côte-des-Neiges? I'd rather leave the car there. It's going to be hard to find a spot on a day like this."

"Yeah. In what?"

"I can leave right now. I'll be there around the same time you do if the traffic isn't too bad."

Wells hung up, butterflies in his stomach. He thought about Malin and how far away she'd felt, wondered if she had been thinking about him before he called. He started toward the parking lot but stopped after a few steps and entered an Indian restaurant, going straight for the restrooms.

He stood at the urinal, holding his pants but unable to relieve himself. He wasn't even entirely sure that he needed to. He pulled his trousers up and shuffled to the sink, washed his hands and looked in the mirror.

When he thought of himself, Wells always had in mind the picture of Malin and him that they had asked a man to take at the beach the first week they had arrived in Greece. On it, his complexion was still chalky and his hair longish, messy and very dark. He looked as if he had not shaved in a week. That was the mental image he had of himself. But as he stood in front of the mirror now, he thought that it would have been easy to mistake him for somebody else, somebody foreign. The man that was looking back at him was slimmer than the one in the picture, his hair lighter and cropped very short, his skin thick and dark, and his cheeks and chin clean-shaven.

Wells put some more water in his hands, dampened his hair and flattened it a little. He pulled a paper towel from the machine, dried his hands, then wiped his shiny forehead.

He got back onto the sidewalk and started walking again, the sun at its apex warming the back of his neck and blinding the people walking in the opposite direction. Distracted, he marched at a slow pace, heading for their meeting spot.

A few blocks further on, he jumped when a small dog started barking at him unexpectedly. Shut up, Wells thought, annoyed.

*“Du calme Mousseline, tranquille bébé,”* the dog’s overweight owner cooed, looking at Wells sideways as she talked to the dog. *“Y fait chaud. Elle est toute énervée la pauvre.”*

Wells nodded. “Don’t worry about it,” he said.

*“Quoi?”* the woman asked.

“I’m fine.”

The woman shook her head and blew a sigh. *“Apprenez donc à parler comme tout le monde tant qu’à venir rester icitte. Viens Mousseline, laisse faire le monsieur.”*



Wells stood there, startled, as the woman started walking the other way, throwing accusing glances at him. My God, these people still exist.

A bit further on, Wells stopped in front of a row of connected historic buildings that had been turned into exclusive commercial property housing haute-couture shops and chic restaurants. In the window of one of the stores, a wide-brimmed, tanned-colored hat adorned a mannequin's head. Wells crossed the street and walked to the display.

Back when he and Malin were still living apart and promising each other the world in marathon late-night transatlantic phone conversations, Wells had fantasized about moving to an exotic locale with Malin and had always had an idea, a mental picture of what that life would be and look like. In these visions, Malin always wore a hat. A hat like that one.

"*Allo*, hi," a young woman ventured, poking her head through the open front door.

"Hi," Wells answered back.

"Beautiful hat," she added almost matter-of-factly.

"It's nice."

"It's Ralph Lauren, brand new. Fall collection. Are you looking for a gift?"

"Well, it would be for a gift. But I'm not really looking for one."

"This would make a great gift though," she said, smiling.

I'm sure Malin would love it, he thought. "How much is it?" he asked, embarrassed.

The woman did not seem fazed by his inquiry. "Four fifty, I think... Let me go inside and make sure."

Four hundred and fifty dollars? Outrageous.

"It's four seventy-five plus taxes," the lady said, walking back outside.

"I'll think about it." Wells smiled at her. "Have a good afternoon."

A few minutes later, Wells began walking up Côte-des-Neiges to the empty parking lot. Anna was there, her back leaning against the passenger door of her car, smoking a cigarette.

“Hello you,” she said warmly.

“Hey. Been here long?”

“Just got here. No traffic at all.”

“I walked slowly and loitered around.”

“Wanna walk a little more?”

“Sure.”

Anna opened the door of her car to hide a few things under the front seats and then locked the doors. “Let’s go this way,” she said, pointing up the street.

They walked a few blocks in near silence then turned onto a residential street. They passed by dozens of beautifully restored houses with carefully trimmed lawns, perfectly painted window shutters and flawlessly even driveways. The hot and damp air was heavy with the smell of smoke and dried grass. They began talking as they walked slowly. Anna looked beautiful, her jeans and camisole clinging to the lovely shapes of her body, her curly brown hair dancing in the warm breeze. She hooked her arm around Wells, as she had always done.

In front of a service station, two men, visibly Jehovah’s Witnesses on a halt between a couple of doors, rested in the shade. Their briefcases between their legs, the men sat there in silence, ties loose and jackets draped over their shoulders, drinking lemonade. One of them nonchalantly patted his neck and moved a few wet and sticky locks of hair from his eyes. Wells nodded at them.

He and Anna started back downtown.

“You want to sit somewhere?” Wells asked. “I’m starting to feel a little wobbly.”

“You hungry?”

“No, not really. I’m mostly jet lagged.”

“How about here?” Anna said, pointing to a small café terrace.

They sat at an outdoor table and ordered iced tea. The terrace was crowded, its plastic tables surrounded by young people, some discussing in hushed tones, some loudly, others studying or writing. He and Anna were facing each other, but her back was to the sidewalk and, after a moment, she moved her chair next to his. “I want to see too.”

The sweltering heat had not discouraged small groups of shoppers from surveying the commercial arcade. The street musicians were braving the heat too and the ice cream vendors with their pushcarts, making a brisk business.

“Do you miss school?” Wells asked.

Anna seemed puzzled by the question.

“Being in school, I mean.”

She thought about this for an instant, then nodded. “I think it’s the sense of belonging. I used to feel like I was working toward something that everybody around me respected and understood, mostly because they were also striving for similar things.”

“But you’re working with teachers now, isn’t it how it is?”

“Sometimes. The energy isn’t the same though.”

Wells tipped his head.

“The people are great here. Really nice. But when you’re sixty years old and have a couple of grandchildren, when you’ve been doing this for thirty-forty years, it’s a job. You know? I miss being able to pick up the phone, call up just anybody and go wild, fill up the car and drive to Colorado or something.”

“Nobody to do that with anymore?”

“I still see a lot of my friends, but—”

“Laurie, James and those guys?”

“Yeah, and Tracy and Heather, but a lot of them are married and/or have kids. We’ll go out for a drink once in a while, but that’s about it. I just miss feeling like I’m a part of—You know?”

Wells smiled at her. “Makes me think of something.”

“What’s that?”

“Remember when we went to visit Tom in Wisconsin?”

“Vaguely,” Anna said.

“Remember the layover in Detroit when we changed terminals?”

“Not really.”

“We got on a bus because the plane was too small to pull up to the gate.”

“OK.”

“It was over-crowded, and there was a nervous feeling inside. Everyone looked anxious at being between flights, in Detroit. They all had immense suitcases and awkward bags.”

“You remember the strangest things,” Anna scoffed.

“The driver—she was a mean looking woman—opened the door and yelled out to somebody else, swearing. She stepped out to hear what the other person was saying back. She only took a few steps out, but it was like a switch had been flicked.”

“What switch?”

“People suddenly smiled at each other and started small conversations in the most casual tone of voice. Some people even carried their discussion the whole way home on the plane. It

was great. Like they couldn't have been themselves with her around, because she was from somewhere else; a foreigner."

"Well *I* don't remember any of this," Anna said. "I'm not even sure what you're talking about, to be honest."

"Ah, never mind. I was just trying to say that at that moment I had felt a part of something too, part of a group."

"You didn't in school?"

"Don't you remember the people from my class?"

Anna burst out laughing. "Ooops. You're right, sorry."

They both remained comfortably quiet for a moment. Wells stared at the tall building standing across the street from them. He drew imaginary lines between the structural points of its gabled roof.

Anna broke the silence. "That was when Tom had decided he was going to marry that girl he had just barely met and who turned out to be totally whacked."

"Yep."

"The only other thing I remember about that trip—"

"The fishing excursion?"

"Yeah," Anna said. "Wasn't that great?"

"We were terrible." Wells laughed. "We didn't catch a single fish in two days."

"We didn't? I don't know. I only remember lying in the dinghy with you and drinking cheap wine all afternoon. Did we even really try to catch something?"

"I'm not sure," Wells said. "I think we pretended at first just to please Tom and his girlfriend who were trying so hard. What was her name again?"

“Helena? Lola?”

“No it wasn’t!” Wells giggled. “Oh! Lisa, no, Alicia.”

“That’s right, Alicia. Wow, I’d forgotten all about that trip. I think that was the last time I slept in a tent.”

“Did we even sleep that night?” Wells asked before regretting the question.

As the light dimmed in the early evening, they both felt hungry and decided to go look for a restaurant on Sainte-Catherine’s. They settled on a small bistro and opted to sit inside. The cozy, faintly lit dining room of the restaurant was quiet as they sat, absorbed by the menu. The wine was fruity and mellow. The lit candle at the centre of the table reflected in Anna’s eyes and made them sparkle.

It is incredible, Wells thought, how increasingly attractive beautiful women become as you spend more time with them. Anna sat facing him, her long hair cascading over her shoulders, and the pale blue colour of her camisole looking like the Saint-Lawrence’s shoreline against the darkness of her shoulders.

The waiter brought their plates after a few minutes and the conversation slowed down a little as they started eating.

“I haven’t eaten very much since I got here—just smoked meat yesterday. The time difference and everything.”

“The pizza here is great though, isn’t it?”

“It is very good. You want to taste?”

“Do you mind?” Anna asked.

Wells cut a little triangle off of his pizza and balanced it on his fork. Anna opened her mouth.

They ordered more wine. It was a perfect evening; the restaurant was peaceful, the music good, Anna beautiful and the wine warm as it slowly went down.

Wells broke the silence this time. “Tell me about this boyfriend character.”

“I met Travis—did I tell you his name was Travis?—at this benefit where I was playing in a quartet, in a church. He pretty much sat by the small stage and listened to the music the whole time. At the end of the night, he came over and introduced himself. We had the best conversation, and we went out to dinner the next day and—that was it.”

“How long were you two together?”

“Your brother asked me the same question when I saw him the other day. It’s embarrassing that I can’t remember. Hang on...” Anna looked up, visibly lost in count. “A little over a year and a half,” she finally declared.

“And you lived together?”

“Yeah. After three months, isn’t that crazy?”

“I’m impressed. I never would’ve thought you had it in you.”

“Neither did I. But look at where I am now; who says I did?” She shrugged. “That’s not fair. It was actually going well for quite a while. He’s really a great guy.”

“So what happened then?”

“I don’t know. We were together all the time at first, like you and me, you know, but then he started working back in the Townships more, and so he would leave for three or four days at a time, which was fine at first because I missed him. But it got to the point where I

slowly started getting used to it and began looking forward to the days he was gone more than the ones he was here.”

“Tough. How’s he taking it?”

“We don’t really talk anymore. He’s pretty pissed. I think he feels like he was set-up or something.”

Wells signalled for the bill. The waiter nodded and came over to the table, placing the discreet black leather folder on the table, between them, and walked over to another table. They both reached for the bill simultaneously. They insisted on treating the other, citing various rules of politeness and other alibis, but there was just no deterring Anna. In the end, they split the bill, which left Wells feeling a little uncomfortable. Malin wouldn’t have argued.

They walked back to the car in a quiet daze, feeling a little tipsy from the prolonged sitting and the red wine. When they reached the parking lot, Anna kept walking. Wells followed without a word. They turned on the same street they had walked earlier that day, and then on another. After a few minutes, the streetlights disappeared and the street became a narrow, climbing dirt road. They trudged on for a few hundred metres until they got to a vista, in a park, overlooking the city.

With no trees or artificial light around, the sky seemed immense and heavy, like a dark blanket peppered with bullet holes. The blinking red light of a radio antenna was the only reminder of life, far off in the distance. They lay on the ground.

“How’s your dad?” Anna asked.

“Fine, I guess. Haven’t gone to see him yet.”

“You haven’t?” she said, indignation in her voice. “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”



“What the—”

“Don’t make me feel bad. He doesn’t know I’m here. I just wanted to come and do this by myself. You know my father. He means well, but sometimes he’s a bit much.”

“Your father’s so good. What are you talking about?”

“He is good. It’s just that all he talks about is that he doesn’t understand what I’m doing over there in Greece with a woman, a woman he doesn’t know, mind you, instead of being back here.”

“So? Of course he wants you here.”

“It’s not just that. He has subtle ways of making me feel guilty for not working with him and Cammy. He says that the most important thing for him is that we are both happy and doing what we want to—even if that implies being a ‘flute player’ he always adds sarcastically—but the truth is, he secretly hoped all this time that we would somehow both drift back here, no matter if we’d become engineers or doctors, and work with him.”

“Are you sure that’s not just the pressure that you’re putting on yourself?” she asked.

“Does it matter? You should hear him talk about the time I’m wasting and how much Cammy’s doing and this and that.”

“Poor little boy,” she taunted.

“Shut up,” Wells said, a little rougher than he had intended to, but Anna seemed to ignore this.

“Want to go for a nightcap?” she asked.

Wells declined the offer, knowing that anything more would be toying with the possibility of a jagged headache the next day, and although the thought of a drink sounded

attractive, the idea of a long flight with arteries pulsating in his cranium was enough to cool his craving.

“Come on. *I* want one. Let’s go see who’s playing at Upstairs.”

“What time is it?”

“I don’t know,” Anna said, “like ten-thirty or eleven.”

Wells wanted to call Malin again before leaving, but figured that he had better wait a few hours before doing so. “Alright, a quick one then.”

They headed for the small pub, expecting to hear music pouring out of it, but the place was dead. They walked in and the bartender greeted Anna, then nodded at Wells.

“Nobody playing tonight?” Anna asked.

“No,” the man said. “It was supposed to be a bunch of Concordia students doing an open mic thing, but they cancelled at the last minute. It’s been like this all night.”

“Do you mind if we get a quick one?”

“Not at all. Sit down. I’m here until midnight anyway. The *Boréale Rousse* is on special tonight. What can I get you?”

“Two gin and tonics.”

“Two?” Wells said.

“One for me, one for you.” Anna smiled.

Wells shook his head. “Would you do me a favour?” he asked Anna when the bartender brought their drinks. “Could you play something for me?”

“Do you mind, Bruce?”

“Sure,” the bartender said, shrugging, “it’s been so boring.”

Anna got up and walked to the stage nestled in the small alcove at the front of the long and narrow pub. She sat at the large black piano, which took the bulk of the room on the stage. Wells heard the sound of her fingernails hitting the keys, and then the smooth and deep tone of a minor chord. Anna cleared her throat, and began singing: *The phone's off the hook/No one knows where we are/It's a long time since I've drank Champagne.*

Wells wanted to hear a Tom Waits song; he always asked for one. Anna's voice was soft and whispery, unlike Waits', but her version, almost like a torch song, at the very least rivaled the original. In any case, Wells thought, it is a lot sexier this way. Anna's voice broke a little on the high note: *In that woman/There's a heart I love/I'm going to take it/With me when I go.*

Anna turned in her seat to look at him when she was done.

Bruce and Wells both clapped. "Something else," Wells pleaded.

Anna turned to the keyboard again and started playing a beautiful piece that Wells could not recognize. He listened attentively at first, then let his mind drift. He thought about the plane in the morning, about Malin at the airport, then of a Haiku he had seen in the afternoon, written in chalk on Sainte-Catherine Street:

*Though I am in Kyoto*

*When the cuckoo sings*

*I long for Kyoto*

When Anna finished the piece, she got up and came to sit beside him. "That was beautiful," Wells said. "Thanks."

They both sipped their drinks quietly. The sounds of the night drifted through the open front windows. Anna's perfume permeated the air. She slapped Wells' thigh and left her hand there. "I'm glad you called. I had fun today."

“Me too,” Wells said. “We have to go, though. I need to get some sleep.”

They got up, paid and tipped, then stepped out into the warm night air.

“So you’re not staying with your dad then?” Anna asked.

“No.”

“You got a hotel room?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God!” Anna added with indignation.

“Don’t, just don’t,” Wells said. “It’s too late.”

“A few blocks from your house, too.”

“I’ll walk you to the car. I’m staying at the Méridien, right around the corner.”

“I’ll just get a cab,” she said. “I’m not sure driving would be such a good idea right now.”

They turned toward the bar and saw the bartender turn off the lights and take the trash out by the side door.

“Let’s just find a payphone,” Wells suggested.

“There,” Anna said, pointing to one down the street, on the side of a building. They walked to it, and Anna started scavenging her purse for a quarter. “Any change?”

Wells searched both of his pockets symbolically and shook his head.

“Shit. You sure?”

“What do you mean? I’m sure. You wanna look?”

Anna put her hands in Wells’ pockets, pretending to find something there. There was an awkward pause.

Anna was leaning forward. Wells could see the outline of her breasts in the opening of her camisole. She moved closer, kissed him lightly on the lips, then pulled his head towards her and opened her mouth against his. Wells felt her tongue stroking his lips, then his tongue.

They moved down the alley and Anna led Wells to a large block of concrete, pushing him down to sit. She unzipped his pants and slipped her hand inside.

“No,” Wells exclaimed, a trifle wildly. “Not here.”

But Anna ignored this. She lowered herself to him, and Wells felt the warmth of her mouth. He took a deep breath and sighed, then put his hands in her hair, pulling with his fingers. He heard a car passing, then silence.

Anna got up again and pushed Wells down further, until he was lying completely supine on the slab of cement. Wells caressed her breasts over her camisole, but Anna moved his hands off. She unbuttoned his shirt and kissed his chest, then licked his nipples. Wells felt a surge of adrenalin going through him, and for a second thought he was actually going to come. Anna went down again, and Wells’ legs weakened as he closed his eyes. “Careful, it’s—” he mumbled, warning her. Anna looked up at him. She’s so sexy, he thought. He sat up and put his hands on Anna’s arms. “Come with me.”

They walked briskly to the hotel. Wells wondered whether the front door would be open. He realized that this was a momentum that could easily be broken, that any obstacle would probably bring him back to his senses.

When he reached the front door of the Méridien, he suddenly wished for it to be locked. And he wished for it to be open, which it was. The lobby lay dark and dormant. “I’m in 307,” Wells said awkwardly.

Anna nodded, and they climbed the stairs two at a time. They walked in the room, and Anna sat on the edge of the bed. “Come here,” she said and pulled him towards her when he was close enough.

She began undressing him slowly, taking off one item at a time and gently kissing the bare skin as she uncovered it. Wells stood before her, naked. He shivered. They looked into each other’s eyes. Anna lay on her back, and Wells straddled her. On his legs, he could feel the roughness of her jeans and on his chest, the silk of her camisole. Her skin was smooth and fragrant. Wells kissed her long and slowly. Anna kissed him back. He undressed her convincingly and pinned her wrists to the mattress. Staring down at her body, a flood of memories came rushing back.

For months, before, he had secretly hoped to see her naked body again, even if only once. He had missed her prominent, almost child-like ribcage, her awkward knees and curly hair. But he had given up the idea after a while, sometime between the moment he had decided this would never occur and before the dream began to take mythic proportions.

And there he was now, on top of her, and there she was, oblivious to all these thoughts, to all the time he had spent trying to purge himself of her body, her perfume. Anna brushed a strand of hair from her face, the same way she had always done, and dozens of other memories rushed to his mind: making love on a Sunday morning with the windows open in her apartment, hiding from the rain in the alcove of a store’s entrance, on Saint-Laurent, after having eaten at the small Portuguese restaurant. And then, again, the aching. He still hated her for the pain.

She started caressing him. And as blood flowed, he saw things as they were. Anna, even right there, was miles away, as she had always been. And the comfort he now felt came from this freedom, from the vastness of the gap that separated them, the same immensity reflected in

this city, this province, this country. And what about Malin? Wells wondered. As was the case with Kythera, it was the closeness that created the warmth he had come to love.

And Anna's body, far from being as flawless as he had long remembered it, was sprawled under him like the province he had fled. In her round breasts and small nipples he could see Mount-Royal, in her long arms, Sherbrooke Street stretching from one end of the city to the other, and in her eyes, the city's skyline. He could not find Malin there; she did not exist in that landscape of evergreen trees and endless cold winters. Malin's small, upturned breasts and pointy nipples, her round shoulders, could only breathe Kythera and the ocean air.

It got to be that he could not distinguish between the city, the pain, Anna's body, and the hatred of all three.

She moved from under him and turned on her belly. Wells lay on her, letting the weight of his body push her down into the mattress, then slipped into her. Slowly, he began thrusting deep and Anna moaned. "Faster," she whispered.

And faster he thrust, his fist and jaw firmly clenched. Then he moved back awkwardly and pulled Anna to her feet. Wells picked her up and carried her across the room. Standing behind her, he leaned into the large window, pressing Anna's body against the cold glass. She gasped, then moaned louder. Above her shoulders, Wells could see the lights of the city shining bright. Anna pushed against the glass, sticking out her ass. And there it was. Everything. He could almost see his parent's house. And the hospital, like the Kastro in Hora, staring down at them.

"Feel me," she groaned as Wells pushed his groin on her and felt everything inside him release. He let out a long breath.

Anna shivered, then moved back to the bed. Wells let himself fall at her side.

Silence filled the room.

“Are you OK?” Anna asked after a while.

Wells nodded. “You?”

“I am,” she said, getting up to go to the restroom.

Wells propped his head with a pillow and watched Anna wash her hands and face deliberately. She was a thousand kilometres away, just in the other room. And again, mapped out before him, all Wells could see was everything he had grown to resent: space, her small thighs, the geography of grief.

“Do you ever feel scared of being with someone for a long time?” Anna asked, coming back to lay beside him in the bed but not touching.

“How do you mean?”

“Just the fact that it circumscribes who you are in a way.”

“You mean that we end up being like the people we’re with?”

“Well, more that being with someone is so finite. It means you’re not with this person or that person. *This* is your partner. *This* is the person you have chosen, and as great as he is, he can’t be what he’s not. Maybe he’s a doctor or a hockey player, but then he’s not a poet or an astronaut. I feel like it imposes limits on who I can be, too.”

This feeling that Anna was referring to, Wells understood clearly from having experienced it, and yet, paradoxically, he hated that she could feel that way too, partly because he was convinced she had felt that incompleteness with him. “I think sometimes we tend to get attached to people who are unlike us, or rather who make us feel more complete by being what we’re not. But this fades away quickly when you see what their limits are.”

Anna chuckled. “I thought I was crazy.” She kissed him on the forehead.



“I’m glad this is all over, though,” Wells added with conviction but starting to feel sleepy.

“If it’s working so well, though, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Sorry.”

“No, go ahead.”

“It’s just. I don’t know. What *are* you doing here?”

“What about you?”

“I’m single. It doesn’t matter. You’re not. Or maybe you two do this all the time?”

“Shut up,” Wells said.

“I just can’t help but wonder how much of your worship for that woman comes from the fact that she just isn’t from here and doesn’t know anything about here.”

“So what?”

“It’s the easiest form of escapism.”

“I love her,” Wells said, unwavering.

“I’m sure you do,” Anna answered flatly. “Let’s try to catch some sleep.”

As she said this, Wells started dozing off. He wanted to prove Anna wrong. To show her that he had changed. That he had become better, stronger. He fell asleep despite his best efforts.

## EIGHT

Wells woke up a few hours later, unsure of how long he had slept or exactly when it was that he had succumbed to his fatigue. He felt a hand on his head and opened his eyes. Anna was sitting up, her back to the wall. She caressed his hair. Wells winced when he realized that he was still completely nude. The early morning sun was sifting through the blinds.

“Good morning,” Anna said softly.

Wells smiled and got out of bed awkwardly, looking for his clothes, scattered about on the floor.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Good.”

Wells could not locate his underwear. “What time is it?”

“Eight,” Anna said. “What time’s your flight?”

“I need to be at the airport around noon, I guess. But I need to pick up my visa at the Greek Consulate before that.”

They both had a quick shower. Wells got dressed and packed his suitcase, then checked the room to make sure he wasn’t leaving anything behind. They went to the dining room, downstairs, for a breakfast of toast and coffee. The edge from the night before had disappeared; Wells could feel his head pounding from the lack of sleep and the alcohol he’d had. “You’re not working today?” he asked.

“I teach a class at four.”

“Aren’t you hung over?”

“No, are you?” she laughed lightly.

“A little. I don’t drink that much.”

“You’ll be fine. You can sleep on the plane.”

After breakfast, Wells checked out at the front desk, picked up his bags, and they both started up the street for the parking lot. He stopped in his tracks, on the sidewalk.

“What’s wrong?” Anna asked.

“Hang on for a minute, will you?”

“Sure. What for?”

“Just—I’ll leave my bags here. It’ll only take a minute.”

Wells ran down the street, leaving Anna behind. He opened a door and went in a shop.

“Can I help you?” the woman behind the counter said before raising her head. “Oh, hello again.”

“I’ll take the hat in the window,” Wells said, pointing. “She deserves something nice,” he added.

“I’m sure she does, sir,” the young woman agreed.

“Can I get a box for it, too?”

“No problem, sir.”

He walked back to where he had left Anna. She was sitting on the front steps of the bank, across the street from the hotel, smoking a cigarette.

“Last minute shopping?”

“Yeah,” Wells said, hoping she would not ask any details. Also hoping she would.

Anna didn’t seem concerned. “We should get going.”

The city had the bustling feel of a Monday morning, people walking about aimlessly, and hordes of shoppers sharing the sidewalks of Sainte-Catherine's with tired looking men walking to the office. But the roads were clear, the drive smooth.

Anna double-parked in front of the consulate building. Wells ran out and when he returned, visa in hand, Anna drove onto the expressway, heading for the airport. They did not talk. "So how long do you think it'll be before you get back here?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

"I don't know. Couple months at least. A year maybe."

"I mean, move back."

"That question, always that question," he said. "Why should I?"

She scoffed. "Come on, you know you will. You can't loaf around in Greece your whole life."

"This isn't the only way, you know. This life here is no gold standard."

"Please, don't give me this."

"I hate this city, this province. Nobody's happy."

"And you are?" Anna asked.

"The point is that I'm trying, Anna. And you know that."

"But I also know it doesn't have to do with being there."

"What's it to you, anyway?"

"Nothing," she said, "I'm just curious."

"About what?"

"About who's made you become so ashamed of your roots."

"My *roots*?" Wells said abruptly.

“This is where you’re from, like it or not. You talk about how great your life is now. This is a part of you too, you know. You can’t be so selective with your past. Why didn’t you go study in Athens if Greece is so perfect?”

“So I have to stay forever just because my parents gave birth to me here? I can’t want something different?”

“Run away from yourself, you mean.”

“Shut up about it already. Who the hell—”

“Are you pissed off?” Anna asked defiantly, interrupting him.

Wells felt childish. “No, I’m just tired,” he said.

The sun was high and hot by the time they reached the airport. Anna pulled the car up to the curb. They both got out and fetched the suitcase and the hat in its large box from the trunk. Wells put everything down at his feet and took a step forward towards Anna. They held each other for a moment.

“It was great to see you again,” Anna said.

“Strange, but good.”

And, for some reason, at that moment, Wells wanted Anna to hold him again, to tell him she did not want him to leave, that she wanted to start over, to try again. He desperately wanted her to tell him she still loved him, that she had never stopped loving him, all this time, these hundreds and hundreds of days they had spent apart. “Give me a call sometime,” was all Anna said.

Do you know about entanglement, he wanted to say, and explain to her how research had shown that once particles touch and are linked, it becomes impossible for them to change without

affecting the other, even when separated by great distances. But “I promise” is what he settled for.

They both knew this was a lie.

Wells picked up his luggage and walked towards the sliding doors. He stopped and turned as Anna was getting back in the car. He started walking again and heard her drive off before he was swallowed by the throngs of passengers.

In the airport, after having checked in at the counter in a daze, he sat down at his gate. Around him, everywhere, life. Wells felt as if he were moving in slow motion. Again, Anna had been there, and again, she was gone. Wells couldn't shake the frustration. How did I let myself fall for it again? She did this on purpose, he thought. A part of him knew that his anger stemmed from Anna's complete detachment. She had proven once again that she did not need him. This is so fucking ridiculous, he thought. I wouldn't even want this woman if I could have her. But he also knew that, childish as it was, therein lied the reason for the profound sadness he felt.

With the swarming of life about him, he began to shift his attention: the stubble on a man's chin, a woman breastfeeding a baby, two whiny kids pushing each other under the exasperated eye of a tired father. And all these lives suddenly appeared to Wells as defined, closed circles. They were all lives unfolding in front of him, and yet he would never be a part of them, never understand them, never know what they felt like. And again, just like that, Anna would keep living her life without him, as if he had never come. Wells knew she would not think of him when heading out to dinner with a man she would meet at the gym, nor would she when they would kiss at the end of the evening, or when he'd go back to her place and she would

take her clothes off. Not once would the thought of him cross her mind. Wells sank in his chair, letting out a slow breath to try to steady his nausea. My God, he thought, I'm a mess.

And then he thought of Malin. Not of how any of this would or could affect her, but just thought of her. He remembered how she had run to him at the airport, the first time he had flown to Stockholm to visit with her after long weeks of eager phone conversations, and how he had worried the whole flight because he could not remember what Malin looked like and feared that the romance of the moment, the first time they had met, had clouded his vision. Before getting off the plane, he tried to convince himself that these were matters of little importance, especially considering everything else between them exceeded their respective expectations thus far, but failed miserably. These worries disappeared the moment he saw her coming toward him in a long, black wool coat, her hair bristly from the cold. He realized that this was the unfolding, the culmination of their slow and steady twenty-odd year progression toward each other. Everything after that had come naturally: kissing her forehead, burying his nose in her neck, and then kissing her in bed, in her small apartment, like a teenager in love.

Thinking of this, and of Malin, in Kythera, waiting for him, suddenly washed everything else away. He did not need Anna. There was nothing left for him here. It was Malin he missed, Malin who could understand him and make everything better with a smile. It was Malin he loved and no one else. He just wanted to be home, in Kythera.

He boarded the plane without so much as a trace of his earlier nervousness. The thought of going home, amalgamated with the image of Malin's beaming smile at the airport, sufficed to flush the adrenalin from his system. He settled in for the long flight.

In London, Wells' connection was so tight that he had to run between terminals to get to his other flight on time, thinking the whole time that he did not want to spend a night alone in

London, where he and Malin had met, of all places. But he reached the gate with a few minutes to spare and made the second flight.

When the plane finally touched ground in Kythera, it was early morning the next day. They had agreed that Malin would pick him up, even though Aidan had offered to. Wells wanted to see Malin as soon as he'd get there. He was happy just to be on the ground.

Wells went through customs uneventfully and, with the excited nervousness of a child, walked out of the arrival area and into the airport terminal where camera flashes were going off around him everywhere and crowds of expectant families were waving and screaming, celebrating the return of a brother or an aunt with smiles of family loyalty.

Wells heard his name through the chaos of the room. And there she was, running towards him wearing a yellow summer dress, her hair tied with a complex array of bobby pins, a blue flower pinned on the side of her head. She jumped in his arms and held him tightly. They did not talk for a few seconds. Wells kissed her forehead.

"I missed you," she said. "How was it?"

"I'll tell you all about it, but let's just get my suitcase. I want to go home."

They walked to the baggage claim holding hands. Wells kept sneaking glances at her. Malin was even more beautiful than he remembered. He noticed men turning around in the airport to look at her. This made him smile.

They waited a while for the conveyor belt to start and the suitcases to begin coming down the chute. Malin held his hand. Wells started feeling weak and nauseated. He wasn't sure whether it was the transatlantic flight, the exhaustion, or just happiness.

"You're trembling. Are you alright?" Malin asked.



He looked at her, this small woman, her sparkling blue eyes and thin mouth; he realized how much he had missed her, but also experienced a form of sympathy for her, knowing that she had no idea what had happened, knowing she never would because he would never tell her. He had thought about it, but not really debated. He had decided there would be no point.

Love is the tendon between muscle and bone. Once torn, it can't ever be as strong again.

"I realized something this weekend," Wells said.

"What's that?"

"This is it. I want you. Only you," he whispered as his lips touched the delicate skin of her neck. "I never want to leave without you again, OK?"

Malin leaped and spun around, filling the dead space with her sweet perfume. "Hey! There's your suitcase!"

## **PART TWO**

### **MALIN**

## NINE

Malin suddenly thought of Wells when she brushed the skin of her stomach absent-mindedly, as if there had been memories hiding there, waiting to be released upon touch, like the scratch-and-sniff stickers she used to collect as a child.

Malin closed her eyes. She thought of that time at the hotel—was it already a year ago now?—and how, in the morning, he had walked in the bathroom while she brushed her teeth; the embarrassment, how weak she had felt for having him witness such human frailty so early on. But Wells seemed oblivious to it, hoisting her up on the cold marble counter, gently slipping her underwear off and getting on his knees. Malin could remember the exact feeling of his lips on her calves, the inside of her thighs. If she focused enough, she could almost feel it.

She caressed her breasts and let her fingers slide between her legs, inside her. The feeling of Wells' tongue, the wetness on her fingers. She arched her back slightly, struggling to keep quiet.

She bit the web of her thumb and tasted blood when she came. Malin lay still, breathing deeply. She thought of the ocean. At first, the gentle lapping of water, a faint marine smell, and then waves, waves and waves, and everywhere around, a blueness that she couldn't grasp. The water was trying to find her weakness, trying to find its way into her body to invade her lungs.

From a distance, she heard a cavernous peal that sounded oddly familiar but couldn't identify. She gradually began to recognize other sounds: the metrical *whoosh* of crashing waves, a cat's meow, a group of children playing in the alley below, their repetitive *kaléste tin astynomia*—call the police—bouncing off the walls. A cold hand on her back startled her.

“The phone.”

Malin opened her eyes too quickly, and they flooded with light. She closed them again, turned on her side and searched blindly for the receiver. She picked it up and barely managed to catch the phone before it fell to the floor, and mostly likely to pieces as it always did. “Hello, Malin,” she answered.

“Hey.”

Wells. “Hey. What time is it for you? Early, right?”

“Sounds like you’re still sleeping,” he said. “How are you?”

Malin felt the stubble of a chin on the skin of her back and tried to push the face away in a less than assertive manner. With Wells’ voice in her ear, this almost felt right. She struggled to keep her voice steady. “Just woke up.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to,” Wells said.

“No, no, that’s OK.”

“So what have you been up to?”

“Stop,” she said, wanting to know how he was doing over there. “Tell me about the trip. How’s everything?”

“It’s fine.”

“Did you get the visa?”

“I asked them to rush it. Had to pay extra, but it should be ready for me right before I have to fly back.”

“Good. Seen anybody you know?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, what else then?”

“It’s good to hear you.” There was longing in his voice. “It makes me miss you like every night last year.”

“I know,” Malin said earnestly. “How was the flight?” she asked.

“I got pretty nervous when I boarded,” Wells answered, “but I ended up sleeping a lot. The flight out of Heathrow was fine. I don’t know; it always seems to be the first one that freaks me out.”

Malin felt a mouth laying kisses on her back, all the way up her spine. “I should get going. I have to meet Gabriella. Get to bed. Being tired will do you no good.”

“OK, just wanted to say hi.”

“I’m glad you called. Good—”

“Mal?”

“Hmmm.”

“Can I tell you something I’ve never told you before?”

Malin heard him toss in bed. “Sure,” she said, increasingly anxious.

“Do you remember our first week in Athens, the afternoon we sat in that terrible Chinese restaurant, drinking tea?”

“Of course.”

“I was just getting accustomed to the lines in your hands, to seeing your face move when you speak. We talked about the year Olof Palme was gunned down and how you remembered being seven or eight then and still living in Stockholm. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“You told me about that windy autumn and how you would sneak out of the house to walk to the shore by yourself and stand there, arms outstretched and eyes closed, hoping to be swept away by the gale.”

What was he getting at? “The ocean wind is so strong sometimes,” she added, immediately regretting the comment both for its vacuity and for the mitigating effect it had on the atmosphere Wells seemed to want to set.

“Here’s my secret,” he continued, ignoring this. “The beauty of the image it conjured up made me realize right then that I wanted to be with you. Wanted it for a long time.”

“Stop. We can’t have this talk over the phone; not now, not anymore. Write it down if you have to. I want to be sitting in front of you for this.”

“I know. It’s late. I just needed to tell you.”

“I’m glad, it’s just that—”

“I know,” he said.

“Is everything OK?”

“Yeah, why? You?” he asked.

“Mmm. I’ll talk to you soon, OK?”

“Yeah. Goodnight. Love you.”

“Me too, goodnight.”

She hung up and turned on her side.

“Wells?” he asked.

“Who else would it be? Who do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” he said, smiling. “How many other people are calling you this early in the morning?”

“Go to hell,” she tossed back at him.

He climbed on top of Malin and kissed her collarbone, her shoulder. She felt his tongue gliding up her neck and drawing small circles in her ear. He put his lips around the pinna, holding her entire ear in the warmth of his mouth.

“Stop, I can’t,” she said, unconvincingly, her voice more moan than plea. Malin tried to keep still, tried not to cringe, but her shoulder muscles instinctively twitched and contracted as if to squeeze his face into obedience. This was intolerable for her—not knowing if he was going to blow in her ear or not. He pinned down her wrists and kissed her hard and slow, then pulled back and slipped off the sheer pajamas Malin had put on during the night, as a sort of barrier, hoping that they would suffice in reminding her of the line she wasn’t to cross.

## TEN

It's strange, Malin thought as she hugged Wells outside the airport. You spend your whole life accumulating memories, and they pile up around you like a stack of bricks that separates you from the others. Then one day, someone just opens a door and meets you inside.

After kissing him goodbye, Malin turned away so he would not see the look on her face. She knew Wells was nervous about leaving and about going home—he always was about things she didn't think twice about—but she was glad to finally get some time alone. Don't turn around, she thought. Malin could feel his stare and knew enough not to catch it. She jumped in the old VW and started toward the ferry station. Traffic had lightened, and she drove fast, hoping to catch the early boat to Kythera and not have to waste the entire day waiting for the following one.

The ship was predictably late and still waiting when she reached the port. She drove onboard, and by the time the horn sounded to signal that they were setting off, she had managed to find a seat on the upper deck. Lucky, she thought. Malin watched the coastline widen and grow fainter with the boat inching away from the mainland. For a moment it felt as if the ground were moving from under her feet.

Two years before, at Heathrow. Flying to Chicago to spend Christmas with her mother for the first time. Across the corridor, a tall and slender man in a grey suit and crisp white shirt seemed lost in thoughts. He was handsome in a strange way; a sadness made him stand out in the room.



A short and pushy salesman in a Hawaiian shirt on the flight from Göteborg had invited her for a drink and a couple of American kids had whistled at her in the airport, high-fiving as they walked. And he hadn't looked up. She wanted him to; she couldn't help it.

She got up and took the seat next to him, mumbling something about the light being better for reading on that side. He looked at her sympathetically and nodded.

Sitting on the ferry, looking out at the water, Malin cringed thinking of this. How pathetic. But then, look at us now. She could hardly believe how far they had come since.

In the restaurant, one level below, she found an empty table in the crowded room and sat down with a bottle of sparkling water and a fashion magazine. A man cleared his throat. Malin looked up.

"This seat taken?"

She shook her head and went back to reading.

"Where you going?"

"Kythera."

He nodded. "Me too," he said, putting out his hand. "Vacation? I'm Eric."

Malin gave up and folded the magazine. "Malin." She decided he was Canadian or American. Probably American. He asked her more questions, and Malin answered flatly, trying to remain polite without showing interest.

"Are you alone?" Eric said.

Already? "I'm not, actually."

"Oh, I see. Where's he right now?"

She debated whether to say: waiting for me at home, somewhere above Europe or—"In Canada."

“So you’re not *really*—”

“We are. He’s only gone for a few days,” she said. Malin noticed a ring on the man’s left hand. I bet he’s got kids too, she thought. He handed her a business card. Malin couldn’t hold back a frown, but despite this, or perhaps because of it, she pulled the card towards her and looked at it. “Eric Calloway, business consultant,” she said loudly, hoping someone would turn around, maybe a friend in the room, or that he’d blush or wince, but nobody paid attention and the man didn’t seem to mind. She thought about his wife, probably waiting for him at home, taking care of things around the house and telling her friends about her husband’s business trip, about how he really didn’t feel like going, but that he *had* to, and how she understood and maybe had made him a couple of sandwiches to eat on the plane, unaware that, a few hours later, he’d be on a beach in Greece, trying to seduce women many years younger than him.

“I’m based in New York,” he said. “I’m only here for a few days.”

“What for?”

“A hotel chain wants to build a small resort on the island, and they hired me to come up with some numbers: costs, feasibility, potential returns, that sort of thing.”

“What chain?”

“Can’t say.”

Malin nodded. “Hope they don’t go through with it.”

The man smiled. “That’s what my wife says.” He wiggled his ring finger intently. “We got married in Kythera twelve years ago, coincidentally enough. It’s a beautiful place, but you know how these things are. It’ll happen sooner or later. If it’s not this company, it’ll be another one.”

“Does that make you feel less guilty?”

The man shrugged. Maybe Malin had misread him. He seemed pretty harmless.

“Are you busy this weekend?” he asked.

“I have friends coming over to visit,” she lied.

“I see. Well, I’m going to be at the small hotel between Hora and—”

“Have fun,” Malin said. She got up and headed outside, hoping she wouldn’t hear the sound of the man’s chair being pushed back. How could anyone fall for this? You’d have to be pretty vain not to think he’s just going to turn around and try his luck with the woman sitting on the other side of him.

The sun-drenched deck felt rather trivial floating in the middle of the sea. She walked to the stern of the ship and tried to disappear into the crowd. She stood there for a while, watching the large gash in the water close on itself like a healing wound behind the boat.

Malin felt restless but tired when she got home, and although she wasn’t very hungry, decided she should eat a little. She made a salad of cucumbers, chunks of roasted red peppers, tomatoes, and olives and sat on the terrace outside to eat. A breeze from the ocean cooled her arms and shoulders, and she closed her eyes for a moment. She sensed her body getting lighter, felt like she could breathe better.

Malin reclined in her chair. She thought of Wells on the plane, probably nervous about setting foot in Montreal again, debating whether he should visit his father or not. She had urged him to, adding that *her* father would kill her if she were in the same country, let alone the same city, and did not spend some time with him. She tried to remember what the gate at Trudeau airport looked like, and to picture Wells walking out of it. Who would he call to pick him up? An old friend, maybe. Or maybe Anna. Malin put down her fork and felt something in her stomach stir. What is wrong with me? she thought. That’s just not me. Relax.

She walked into the house, picked the phone up, and dialed her father's number. As soon as Malin heard the click, a voice in Swedish announced that his mobile was turned off. "Shit," she said out loud. Friday afternoon: shopping, then dinner and a movie with Anika. She tried her mother in Chicago, pacing the room, waiting for the connection, then a ring, two rings, three rings—"Mom?"

"Mal, how are you?"

"Good," Malin said.

"What's new?"

Malin sat down on the living room couch. "Not much, was just calling to say hi, I'm—"

"Well, I wish you'd called last night. I'm at work."

Malin shook her head. "Sorry."

"I just mean we could've had a little time. I have to get going now, it's too bad."

"That's OK," Malin said dryly.

"Everything fine though?"

"Yes. Everything is fine."

"Wells doing OK too?"

"Wells, too."

"Alright, call me later if you can."

"Sure, Mom."

Didn't anybody care? She walked to the kitchen and poured a glass of ice water from the pitcher in the refrigerator. She could hear the wind outside. A shutter banged loudly and startled her. This house needs a bit of fixing, Malin thought. She downed half of the glass in one long pull, and the cold made her teeth ache. She headed to the tall window at the back of the room

from where the sea, quiet a mere few moments before, now seemed agitated. The waves split against the cliffs before retracting, leaving a long, frothy trail behind. Malin stood watching, feeling the movement, the rhythm inside her. She admired the sea for its power, its sheer weight, its lack of pretense. She liked to be reminded of this, the monster hiding under the beautiful façade, when diving off the cliff at the beach. It always seemed to her that half of the battle was fought trying to keep water from swallowing her whole, resisting the pull of the sea beckoning her.

She turned on the water in the bathroom and walked back through the kitchen to the living room to put on a CD. Malin chose the first one on top of the pile—one of Wells’ labeled *Jazz Mix*—and the strident blaring of a horn startled her. She replaced the disc with Leonard Cohen’s *I’m Your Man*, heading to the bathroom to the ominous first bars of “First We Take Manhattan.”

Malin dropped her clothes and stood solemnly facing the bathroom mirror. If I had to alter one part of my anatomy, she decided, I’d choose my breasts. Definitely. Her blonde hair and blue eyes, though boring, she could live with, especially outside of Scandinavia. But she was tired of her breasts. She turned sideways and stared inquisitively at them from this new angle. Different would be nice. A little larger, maybe less space between them. Or smaller nipples, maybe.

Malin stepped into the small tub, letting her back slide against the cold porcelain until she was seated, her knees bent in an angle too acute for comfort. Something about the silence underneath the music, something Malin couldn’t immediately identify, seemed abnormal. Not intensity, she decided, but quality—a lack of tension. She was alone, and she knew nobody

would come walking in for once. This is good, she thought, and rested her head back on the edge of the tub.

The outside of an airplane, then its half-empty cabin. A flight bound for Canada. How did she know that? And she was nervous. Very nervous. Her heart beat faster and faster, she could feel her pulse pounding in her temples, beads of sweat sliding down her sides. It was *Malin* going to Montreal, *Malin* anxious about traveling, about everything.

Her arm jerked and water splashed on the sides of the bathtub. She was awake now but felt as if a little bit of her was still on the plane. This is crazy, she thought. She got out of the tub to fetch a razor and sat down again, contemplating it for a few moments, paralyzed. She began soaping her armpits and legs, then shaved in smooth downstrokes under her arms at first, and a little less carefully on her shins, nicking herself with the final stroke. A drop of blood broke the water's surface and diffused in a pinkish circle. Malin felt the sting of the soap entering the cut. "Ouch," she said out loud, putting the razor down on the floor, then sitting more upright to try to get her knee in the water.

When Malin walked out of the house, the sun had started to set on the horizon and the squat adobe houses bordering the street glowed with the bronze color she liked so much. She sat on a step and watched the evening strollers moving up and down the cobblestone street. The north wind—the same that pushed Odysseus past Kythera, toward the land of the Lotus eaters—blew a little more briskly now. Malin felt a couple of drops of water on her forearms. The last thing she needed. A man walking up the street with a child on his shoulders yelled something Malin couldn't make out. The little girl, head back and mouth open, tried to catch droplets of rain. "*Neró, neró,*" she laughed, swallowing ceremoniously, but the rain stopped. When the

man reached Malin, the little girl tapped him on the head and asked to be lowered to the ground. Malin smiled at the man, then at the child. “*Yiasas*,” Malin said for the little girl.

“*Yiasas*,” she answered shyly. She pointed at her chest, “*Melyá*.”

“*Malin*,” Malin said slowly, insisting on the correct pronunciation. *Melyá* looked surprised. “It’s Swedish,” she added, smiling.

The little girl turned to her father and asked something that Malin couldn’t understand. The man shook his head, and the child began whining.

“*Ti?*” Malin asked. “What is it?”

“She wants to touch at your hair,” the man said. “She say she think it’s like gold.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“*Ennedaksi*,” the man said, nodding to his daughter.

The little girl walked toward Malin, pointing at her hair. Malin nodded and smiled. *Melyá* stepped behind her. She pulled Malin’s hair from her shoulders and patted it down on her back before running her small hands through it, laughing. Malin turned and stroked the little girl’s long, black hair. “You have beautiful hair, too.”

“Goodnight,” the man said, motioning for his daughter to leave Malin alone.

“*Anedio, Malin*,” the little girl said. She jumped down the steps one at a time and ran to her father.

Malin waved. “*Anedio*, little angel.”

The man held his daughter’s hand, and Malin watched them climb up the street and vanish when they reached the top of the hill. For a few minutes after that, she scanned the

neighborhood expectantly, wondering if someone she knew might appear. She recognized a few faces and nodded as people walked by, but no more. She went back inside the house to grab a sweater. Still early, and no way Malin would stay home on a Thursday evening.

She headed toward the square at a leisurely pace, until she caught a waft of the acrid stench of garbage. She hurried past the bin. The white-washed houses lined up in a long canvas against which pink bougainvillea and dangling pomegranates looked like impressionist renditions of themselves. A fruit had fallen from one of the trees and someone—probably a boy—had squashed it into something that looked like a crime scene. The culprit’s blood red footprints led to a door a few metres down the road, and Malin wondered if he had thought about taking off his shoes before walking in the house. Either way, the punishments were always given, it seemed to her, with a distinct lack of conviction, something she and Wells had noticed right away upon settling in town. Kids get away with murder, she thought.

The drone of a crowd grew in intensity as Malin neared Plateia Dimitriou Staï. She stood for a moment, inspecting the diners of the terraces for a familiar face, hoping maybe Gabriella and Aidan would be there, or even Aley—anybody, really. But she didn’t recognize a soul other than the staff at *Niko’s*. That’s strange, she thought. I wonder where everybody is. The chances of finding anyone actually at home on a Thursday evening seemed slim.

Kapsali’s walkway was busy too, but some of the restaurants and terraces had begun to slow down a little. Tourists went for neon signs and fancy storefronts, or guidebook recommendations, and ate early. Many of the waiters were clearing tables, getting ready for the second shift of mostly locals. Outside the *Café Pierrot*, a French Fine Cuisine establishment—something of an oddity in town—Malin spotted Yiannis setting a table. She walked up to the wrought-iron fence delineating the restaurant’s terrace.



Yiannis turned. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Not much, you?” Malin answered, realizing as she spoke that Yiannis’ uneven accent had all but disappeared. She wondered if he’d been watching American movies again.

“Just getting ready for another beating in about an hour. Second shift.”

“Hmm. Seen anyone tonight?” she asked.

“Not really. Lots of tourists. Oh, Ireni dropped by to say hello, though.”

“Heard from Aidan and Gabriella?”

“Spiros said he saw Aley and Gabie earlier. They had a drink, but that was before I came in.”

“And Aidan?” Malin asked.

“What about Aidan?”

She hesitated. “Know where he is? Haven’t seen him for a while.”

He looked at her and frowned. “Could care less about the guy, really.”

Malin thought he was joking for a moment, but then realized he was serious. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Just sick of him.”

“Come on.”

“Nothing, I swear. He’s just—it’s always the same thing. All he talks about is how great he is and this good-looking broad he’s seen on the beach and, and, and...”

Malin tried not to laugh at his using the word *broad*; definitely something he’d picked up in a movie.

“He’s probably working at the bar right now,” he went on, “or sitting somewhere with a stack of white paper, pretending to work on his thesis and trying to pick up.”

Malin smiled. No doubt another one of Yiannis' notorious exaggerations. He and Aidan had probably had an argument over some young model-type who Yiannis had spotted first but who had shown interest in Aidan after a couple of drinks. Typical.

Yiannis suddenly seem to cheer up. "And Wells?" he asked.

"Gone. Went home for a few days."

He shook his head.

"What?" Malin asked.

"Nothing."

"No, what?"

"What are you doing with him?"

Coming from anyone else, this would have offended her, but she knew Yiannis liked Wells.

"You deserve a real Greek man," he said proudly, tapping his chest. "I'd treat you good, like a real woman."

"And you'd be faithful?"

"Women are like beautiful fruit—"

"Save it for the tourists, you lousy conman."

"I'm being serious," he said earnestly, and Malin thought that maybe he now was.

She'd heard accounts of Yiannis' glory days, back when he was known as the town Romeo. She had even heard a story about an affair he supposedly had had with the wife of a wealthy Athenian businessman, which had subsequently garnered him some trouble, forcing him into exile in Crete for a few months. But all this was hearsay, because for all his unashamed self-confidence, Yiannis kept the details of his little escapades private. And Aidan remained

faithfully devoted to Gabriella despite his undeniable charm, so Malin decided that the rift would probably settle over a glass of wine a few nights later. “You shouldn’t say that, trust me,” she said. “Not to your advantage.”

Yiannis smiled and began setting another table. “I mean I’m serious. I love you.”

“What?” Malin said. “You *love* me?”

“I love you,” he repeated. “You’re beautiful, you’re smart. I’d marry you tomorrow.”

“You’re joking. Please tell me you’re—”

“You need someone to take care of you.”

“Yiannis.”

“You need someone who would never leave you behind.”

“Yiannis.”

“You need—”

“Yiannis,” Malin shouted.

“What?”

“Will you stop this shit.”

He raised his hands as if to signal that he was giving up. “I’m waiting though; good things come to—”

“My God, you’re unbelievable.”

“I know,” he said proudly, “but I have to get back to work now.”

“Tell Gabriella I dropped by if you see her, will you?”

Yiannis nodded. “I’m off at midnight tonight. We can go walk on the beach or maybe have some wine at my place.”

“Don’t wait up,” Malin said, walking away and into the crowd. She stopped and turned around to watch him work for a moment. His looks certainly redeemed a portion of his obnoxiousness. He was tall and muscular, and his dark brown eyes stunning enough to make you overlook his slightly crooked nose. Worst thing is, Malin thought, he probably *is* good in bed.

Malin marched along the waterfront toward Gabriella and Aidan’s house, doubtful that they’d be home. The sun had gone down, and the chill coming from the ocean went right through her sweater. She shivered and quickened the pace.

There were no lights inside the house except for the small table lamp that they always left on in the living room window. She knocked anyway, thinking that maybe they’d fallen asleep on the couch. Nobody answered. Malin waited a moment, then knocked again. Nothing stirred inside. She leaned sideways, holding on to the doorframe and tapped her car key on the large living room window, clenching her teeth—she hated that sound. She waited a few more seconds, but finally gave up and began the short climb back to the house.

When she reached the door, Malin heard noises coming from within the house and she froze for an instant, then remembered she had left the stereo on. She fumbled around in the darkened room, finally managing to turn it off. The silence made the living-room double in size. She checked the answering machine, but its light was steady: no messages. Malin lay down on the couch, her knees to her chest. She wanted to tell Wells about the man on the boat, about how long and boring the ride back had been, about Yiannis and, more than anything, about the little girl. She thought about trying his father’s house and looked at the time on the stereo. Ten sharp. I can’t call on the hour, she thought, it’s going to look like I’ve been waiting to call. It’s too

early there anyway. I'm not going to call this weekend, Malin finally decided. She had wished for some time alone in the house for a while now, and she had gotten exactly that.

She went to the bedroom and hung her sweater on the back of a chair. A breeze whistled through the cracks around the window frame. She turned off the lights and lay down on the bed with her clothes on, arms and legs outstretched, trying to occupy as much space as she could.

## ELEVEN

In the morning, Malin walked to the bakery to pick up *kuluri* and lotus and quince marmalade, and hurried back home. Her stomach demanded food now. Sitting at the kitchen table, she heard footsteps outside, then a hard knock and the front door opening.

“It’s me. Anybody here?”

She recognized the voice. “Come in,” Malin said, waiting for Aidan to appear in the room. “I just got food. Felt like having a real breakfast this morning. Hungry?”

“No, thanks. Too early. Wells around?”

“He left yesterday. Sit down.”

“Oh, right. The visa.”

Malin nodded. “Where’s Gabriella?”

“She and Aley decided to go up to Sparta, spur of the moment.”

“Why?”

“Mystras. The Byzantine ruins.”

Malin tore off a piece of bread, spread marmalade on it, and took a bite. “You didn’t want to go?”

“We’ve already gone, me and her. And they looked like they wanted to have a girl thing. They seemed happy I declined.”

“So, no plans today then?” Malin cocked her head. “How come you’re knocking on my door already?” she teased. “She’s only been gone a few hours.”

“I know. I wanted to work on my thesis, but I’m bored already. I woke up so early and couldn’t go back to sleep.”

“The light?”

He shook his head. “Weird dreams.”

“I’ll make coffee.” Malin got up to boil water. She opened a tin, ground some beans, and the aroma of bitter coffee filled the kitchen. She took the *Bodom* to the table and poured Aidan a cup. He didn’t touch it. “What’s eating you, McCullough?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He smiled half-heartedly. “Just knackered. I’ve been drinking way too much lately. *Way* too much. Gotta slow down if I want to see my forties.”

“You’re full of shit. You know that, right?”

Aidan didn’t seem insulted by this. “I want to cut down. I promise you.”

“Are you sure you’re not just hung over?”

He shook his head. They were silent for a moment. Malin stared at him through the steam rising from her cup. He appeared to her now more like a child than a burly Irishman. Something about the way he twiddled with his spoon absent-mindedly felt so innocent, so pure.

Aidan stirred in his seat. “What do you think of Gabriella, honestly?”

“What do you mean? I like her, you know that. She’s my friend.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What is it?” Malin said.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m crazy. She’s been spending so much time with Aley and just hasn’t been interested in me at all.”

Malin knew this. Gabriella had mentioned how it was driving Aidan insane. “You’re such a guy,” Malin scoffed.

“It’s true, though.”

“So? Doesn’t mean she’s suddenly become a lesbian.”

He threw his hands up.

“Do you think you’re that irresistible?” she said.

Aidan ignored this. “How’s it for you, seriously, like?” he asked. “Good?”

“Wells and me?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s good. Very good.” She paused. “And you’re hung over and acting ridiculous.”

“Maybe you’re right. I *am* kind of hung over. Goddam ouzo. Feels like I brushed me teeth with licorice all night.” He sipped his coffee. “I’m not sure Aley’d be her type anyway.”

“Can I ask *you* something?” Malin said.

“Yeah.”

“What happened with Yiannis?”

Aidan seemed bothered by the reference. “You talked to him?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“He owes me some money from the poker game on Monday, but he says Wells and I teamed up against him, so he doesn’t want to pay.”

“*That’s* what happened?”

“Why, what’d you think?”

“Don’t know. It seemed more serious than that.”

“You miss him?” he said.

“What am I, some kind of pathetic matron?” Malin protested. “He hasn’t even been gone twenty-four hours.”

Before Aidan left, Malin invited him for dinner around seven. She knew he’d go right back to bed and wake up a few minutes before that. She would have dinner ready for seven-



thirty. Aidan shuffled his way to the front door and mumbled his goodbyes as he walked out. He and Yiannis are both being childish, she thought. All this for a few hundred drachmas. How ridiculous. Two women would never bicker about something so mundane.

Malin checked her hair in the mirror and threw a book, her sunglasses and a towel in a canvas bag. She decided she would go to the beach before the market, then stop by *Café Pierrot* to invite Yiannis for dinner. Have to remember the wine, she thought.

It felt nice to walk to the beach alone on a weekday and not have to worry about being late for work or for anything else. Malin couldn't complain; with the sun warming her toes and the cheerful horn of the ferry drifting up from the harbor, it seemed like a perfect day indeed.

She picked a spot just far enough from the waterline to set the towel down on the hot sand. She slipped off her dress, then her top, and lay on her back. The heat on her stomach delighted her; she could *feel* her skin getting darker. Wells would have warned her about the carcinogenic effects of the sun and insisted on applying some lotion or cream on her exposed skin, mostly out of concern, and, she suspected, also as an excuse to massage her back the way she liked so she would moan coquettishly. But she wanted to feel the unfiltered warmth on her skin.

Malin had noticed Wells' sudden uneasiness. At first she had thought that he was disappointed, that she wasn't living up to his expectations. They had contemplated the idea of a relationship over the phone for a while. Longing always implies disappointment, she had thought.

"There are naked women everywhere," Wells said, and Malin felt relieved. It was noon in Stockholm, and secretaries walked out of office buildings to sunbathe topless in Kungsträdgården. She could tell that he didn't know where to rest his eyes. She squeezed his

hand. “My father’s patients drop their clothes on the floor when he walks into the examining room, even if they’re coming for a sore throat.”

After visiting Blå Hallen—Wells insisted on seeing the room where the Nobel Prize dinner is held—they drove back to Göteborg and her small apartment alongside the cemetery. Wells dropped his suitcases at the doorstep and, holding Malin by the hand, poked his head in each room. When he found the bed, he plucked Malin from the floor and lay down with her. “Close your eyes,” Wells said softly. “Does this feel less strange?”

Malin smiled. “Tell me something.”

“Yes.”

It felt so good to have the hands along with the voice. “No, anything. Just tell me something.”

“I was scared you wouldn’t recognize me at the airport.”

He’s trying to be cute, Malin thought. It’s working.

“You smell so good,” Wells said.

She turned her head. “Open your eyes.”

When he did, Malin kissed him. With restraint at first, then freely. She had been waiting for this. “Keep your eyes open,” she said when he closed them again. She wanted Wells to remember everything, wanted the moment permanently etched in his soul.

Malin had decided that she wouldn’t sleep with him that night. She wanted him to lust for her just a little longer. But with his cologne in the apartment and his bags on the living room floor, everything felt so right that she questioned her resolution. Wells caressed her thighs, then delicately lifted the waist of her jeans with a probing finger. With the little determination she

could muster, Malin pulled his hand away. She realized that Wells had mistaken this for a playful taunt. His hand started crawling down her waist.

“Stop, stop,” Malin said.

“I’m sorry; I thought—”

“Don’t, it’s fine. That’s just not how I do things.” The truth is that he had to prove himself worthy; Malin had to know that he would never forget.

Wells seemed embarrassed for an instant. He asked for the bathroom. While he was gone, Malin picked his shirt off of the floor, yanked a button from it and slipped it in her pocket—something to remember the night. Wells kissed her when he returned to the bed, and Malin took her clothes off, asking him to spoon up to her from behind.

A few moments passed, and he burst out laughing.

“What?” Malin asked.

“You’re taking your clothes off *now*?”

She hadn’t considered the irony. “Only creepy people sleep with their clothes on.”

Malin could feel the difference in the way people looked when they walked by on the beach. Foreigners often stared lustfully at the topless sunbathers, barely attempting to conceal their glance. This, she didn’t mind. But sometimes it also felt as if the men thought they owned her, even if just for a fleeting moment. Malin hated that.

Lying there, red and orange spots of light behind her eyelids, Malin considered her limited list of authentic Swedish recipes: her grandmother’s seaman beef stew (too long to cook), *kötbullar*, or *Jansson’s* gratin of potatoes and anchovies (too complicated). And for dessert, either sugar cake (too sweet), or *fruktsoppa*. Why did I say I’d cook Swedish? she thought, I

don't even *like* Scandinavian food. She ran through the list of ingredients; she already had everything she needed for the fruit soup at home and decided she'd just make a simple salad and serve the meatballs with gravy.

As she approached the café, Malin recognized Spiros from a distance, sitting at one of the terrace's tables, reading the newspaper. He looked up as if to scan the walkway for potential clients. "Hey, Malin," he said warmly, "*ti trehi?*"

"Spiros, how are you?"

He grinned.

"What's so funny?" Malin asked. And again, after a short silence, "What?"

"Good to see you."

"You too. Quiet today?"

"Guess so." He ran his fingers through his slick, dark hair. "Still early though."

Malin nodded. "Yiannis around?"

"Hasn't come in yet," Spiros said. "He's scheduled to, I'm pretty sure."

"Can you leave a message for him?"

He opened one hand and held the other one above, finger pointing at it as if ready to jot down an imaginary memo.

"Tell him he's invited to dinner at our house at around 7:30—is he working tonight too?"

Spiros shrugged. "Don't know. I'll leave the message."

"And tell him to bring some wine."

"Sure."

Malin walked away, glad to have transferred the wine responsibility onto someone else's shoulders. That was easy, she thought. All I need now is good ground meat and a few vegetables.

The slam of *Socrates'* spring-loaded door didn't succeed in pulling the young man behind the counter from the transistor radio at the back of the store. Malin did not recognize him, though she had to admit that even a regular employee could pass as a perfect stranger; she never shopped for meat. He sat on the edge of his chair, staring at the wall, and despite the break-neck pace at which the announcer spoke and the scratchiness of the reception, Malin could make out a soccer match. She stood there for a moment, quickly becoming irritated. She shook her bag to make her keys and loose change rattle. The man jumped up and looked at Malin apologetically. "Sorry," he said in perfect English, "didn't hear you come in."

"That's OK."

"What can I do you for?"

My God, Malin thought, do they *all* learn English from bad movies? "I'd like some ground meat."

He nodded, "How much?"

"Let's see. I don't know, enough for three people."

"For what?"

"Sorry, for meatballs."

The man tore some waxed paper from a roll. "Alright, some ground lamb for *keftédes*—or would you like beef?"

"I need pork," Malin said.

"Why?"

“Swedish meatballs. Kind of the same, just different spices, and gravy.”

The young man winced. “Gravy?”

Malin was growing impatient. “Could I please get some ground pork?”

“We don’t do pork.”

“Why not?”

He scratched his arm distractedly, obviously trying to make out the radio announcer’s voice over Malin’s. “We just don’t.”

“Can’t you make it?”

“You have to take beef or lamb or—” he stopped there.

“Or what?”

“Nothing, that’s it.”

Malin sighed. “Alright, give me some lamb then.” She would make *keftédes*, and Aidan would certainly tease her about the dubious authenticity of her Scandinavian cooking. *See, she’s one of us now*, Yiannis would proudly say, and they’d all laugh at that.

“Anything else?” the man asked as he handed her the neatly wrapped package.

“I wouldn’t risk asking,” she said flatly, but the man did not seem to notice.

Outside the store, Malin thought about the market. She hated shopping for produce too; she could never pick the right mango or tomato. Malin knew Wells only pretended to enjoy running the errands as much as he did to make sure that he had decent food to cook with, and she was grateful for it. We have rice at home, she thought, and the salad I’ll make with whatever else we have. Never mind the market.

On the way home, Malin reached into her bag to pull out the packet of meat. She wondered if the butcher had given her enough. She knew Aidan and Yiannis could both eat an

enormous amount. It would have to do anyway; she wasn't going back to that shop. Malin could feel the coldness of the meat through the waxed paper. It gave like a baby's flesh under her thumb. She shivered and dropped the packet back in her bag, disgusted.

When she got to the house, Malin put the meat away and went into the small pantry, hoping that she had been right in assuming it held everything she needed. She opened the bag of dried apricots to make sure the fruits hadn't turned sour, but their neutral smell came as a relief. She poured water in a large bowl and dropped a couple handfuls of dried prunes, apricots and apples to soak.

She wondered what time it could be—the clock on the kitchen wall had stubbornly frozen on eleven-thirty. Something else for Wells to fix. By the heat radiating in through the open window above the sink alone, Malin thought that it had to be time for her nap. She felt exhausted even though this seemed absurd to her—a lazy morning could hardly be described as toil. Maybe the sun had dehydrated her to the point of fatigue. She poured herself a glass of water and brought it to the bedroom.

When Malin opened her eyes, she thought she'd slept the night through and felt disoriented, almost dizzy for a moment. She reached behind her to feel for Wells' hand. The clock on the bedside table stared coldly at her, announcing that five o'clock had rolled by a few minutes earlier. "Shit," Malin said out loud, "five already."

She put some water to boil and dropped a cinnamon stick, a few slices of lemon, a clove and some sugar in the saucepan. The fruit had swollen into their youthful, unwrinkled former selves. Malin added them to the boiling water, stirring with a large wooden spoon, and threw in some raisins and dried currants before leaving everything to simmer.

The pink meat felt cold on Malin's hand as she kneaded a few stale pieces of bread and an egg in, then struggled to roll the pasty mixture into small, even spheres. The entire lump converted into so many golf balls of fat-speckled flesh, Malin considered the improbability of eating all of it in one sitting, even between the three of them. Maybe the butcher had given her more than she needed on purpose to make up for his apathy. Malin wondered how much meat Wells would've brought home if he had gone shopping instead.

She fried the first few meatballs in the pan before she realized she'd forgotten to blend the spices in. She carefully arranged the small spheres in even, ordered lines and looked up at the pots sitting on the windowsill, above the sink. She could never remember what was what, except for parsley. Was thyme the one that looked and smelled like pine needles or was that rosemary? And the flat, green leaves: basil or oregano? She took some parsley and randomly tore off a few sprigs of the other plants, then chopped it all up before sprinkling the green flakes over the browning meat. She poured the fruit soup in three bowls and put them away to chill, then cooked some rice and made a salad. With the smell of cinnamon and cloves, of meat and herbs, the house felt alive again. Not bad, Malin thought. Everything ready, with time to spare.

She went to the bathroom and turned on the shower. When she stepped into the tub, the water seemed to activate the dried sweat and salt on her skin. It smelled foreign. Malin tried to picture the face Yiannis would make when Aidan would show up at the door a few minutes after him. She knew they were both stubborn, but not to the point of entirely missing the comedy of the situation. They would certainly apologize to each other—maybe Yiannis would even give Aidan his money—and agree that friendship means more than a few drachmas. They would all eat and drink until late. It was good to organize.



When Malin felt comfortably clean, she put on panties and a bra, then stood facing the mirror to address the natural entropy of her hair, trying to impose order on a few undisciplined wisps. It took a second for her to understand that the flat, muffled ring coming from the living room had to be the phone hidden between the couch's cushions or under a newspaper on the coffee table. Wells, she thought. Malin ran to the living room, but the ringing stopped. She heard the click of the answering machine.

"Hi, you've reached Malin and Wells—"

Not on the table. She removed a few magazines.

"We're out right now—"

She pulled the cushions and threw them on the floor. Nothing there either.

"But leave a message and we'll get back to you."

Malin dropped to her knees.

"Thanks, *Tack*, *Merci*, *Efharisto*."

She winced. Tacky. Got to remember to change the message. She reached under the couch and felt the hard plastic shape.

"Malin?" Aidan's voice resonated in the room.

She froze, holding the phone. The answering machine.

"It's me... I hate to do this to you, but John just called and he's too sick to go in. He needs someone to work the bar tonight. I'm really sorry. Come by and have a drink later, OK? Cheers."

She heard a knock at the door. Yiannis, fuck. Before Malin had even time to move, he walked in holding a bottle of wine and caught her standing in the middle of the room in her underwear. "The phone rang and I—"

Yiannis stood there, silent. He slowly put down the bottle on the small table next to the beige living room couch and marched toward her decisively, holding her gaze until he stood a few inches away, towering over her. Malin felt something move in her chest. She headed back toward her bedroom. “Calm down. I was just walking out of the shower.”

“I gave up waiting after a while last night,” she heard Yiannis say.

She debated whether to come clean with her little scheme—it felt so foolish now. “God, you’re relentless. I invited you for dinner because Aidan was coming over and I wanted you guys to talk like two adults and the three of us to have a nice evening,” she said from the bedroom.

“OK, well, where is he now?”

“He called two seconds before you walked in to say that he had to work at the bar.”

“So he’s not coming?”

“No, he’s not coming,” Malin repeated.

“Good.”

She put on a pair of jeans and rummaged through the small closet to try to find something relatively loose-fitting. “You’re being so childish.”

“He is, you mean.”

Malin sighed. “You didn’t have to work tonight?”

“I took off just to come here,” Yiannis said. “I asked Spiros to fill in for me.”

He’s lying, she thought. “Well, might as well sit down, I made enough food for—  
*Ehoume arketa na taisoume—*”

“—*ta endeka*. For eleven people. Impressive. Corkscrew?”

“Drawer right of the sink, glasses in the cupboard above that.”

“Right.”

Malin found a pink blouse she had forgotten about. It had the slight musty smell of the second-hand stores she used to linger in as a teen. She slipped it on and smoothed it down with her hand. When she walked back in the kitchen, Yiannis was sitting in a chair with a glass of wine in front of him. “Hungry?” Malin asked.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving. What are we having?”

Malin placed the large wooden salad bowl in the center of the table, then prepared each plate with a portion of rice, a few meatballs, and spooned some leftover egg-lemon sauce over everything. She set the plate in front of Yiannis. “Here.”

“*Keftédes*,” he said brightly.

“Kind of,” Malin said. “It was supposed to be a Swedish dinner, but anyway.”

“This is better,” Yiannis said. “Let’s toast.”

She raised her glass. “Cheers.”

“And thanks for the invitation,” he said, suddenly solemn, “seriously.”

Malin nodded, then bit into a meatball. She wanted to taste before Yiannis would. Not bad, she thought. The lamb was tender and the sauce just tart enough. She watched him plop a little ball in his mouth. His face contorted in a mocking grimace.

“What?” Malin asked, annoyed.

“What is this?”

“What do you mean, ‘what is this’?”

“Tastes like spaghetti.”

The nerve, she thought. She made a mental note to sort out the spices. “Just eat.”

Leaning over his plate, Yiannis went to work, systematically poking the meatballs with his fork, dragging them across the sauce and scooping a bit of rice along with them before gobbling it all down. The smacking of his tongue made Malin stop and stare for a moment. Yiannis did not seem to notice. “*Snäll*—please.”

“What?”

“Sounds like you’ve got a hot potato in your mouth.”

He ignored this. “This isn’t so bad.”

“You’re a regular prince,” Malin said. When Yiannis bent over to eat, the outline of his pectoral muscles appeared in the v-shaped opening of his collar and his round, muscular shoulders bulged awkwardly like two grapefruits through his shirt. Malin decided she liked black hair better than any other color.

“More wine?”

She pointed at her glass, still half-full.

“Trying to quit?” he said.

“We’re just having dinner.”

He smiled. “Is that all we’re doing?”

Malin stared at him for a moment, quiet. “What about Wells?” she asked, suddenly resigned.

“What about him?”

“Don’t you care?” Malin said.

“What do you think he’s doing over there, in Canada?”

Oldest trick in the book, she thought. Then again, maybe it would feel good. What if she just let herself go? Yiannis would fuck her. That's what he would do. Fuck her. And maybe it would be liberating to have someone in her and not wish he would just stay, to come without feeling. To be full. "I'm not worried about that at all," she said.

Yiannis seemed to read this for a moment of weakness. He got up, moved his chair next to hers and straddled it backwards.

"Why do you trust him so much?"

"You don't think I should?"

"I don't think *anyone* should trust," he said.

Yiannis was right. Malin knew this. "And why should I sleep with you?"

"Because you'd love it."

"Oh yeah, what would you do?"

He moved a little closer, beside her. She could feel his breath on her neck. "I would pull those jeans off, lay you down on the counter right there and lick you, taste you."

Malin nodded. "Then what?"

"I'd make you come and then I'd make love to you, right here in this room." He put his hand in her hair.

Malin threw her head back and Yiannis pulled on it softly, then a little harder. "Then what?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Wells."

"Why are you just sitting there then?"

"I'm home, aren't I? What are you doing?"

Yiannis scowled at her. “*Mi mus kanis to kokira.*”

“I am full of myself? Get out of here,” Malin said.

Yiannis stomped to the door and turned around. “You’re just angry at yourself because you want to. You know you do.”

Malin slammed the door behind him. She could hear Yiannis waiting outside for her to open again before he finally decided to leave. She let out a sigh. That was close. Damn Greeks think they own the world.

She cleared the table and sat staring into a bowl of fruit soup, the cool silence of the house slowly wrapping itself around her.

## TWELVE

“Sorry about last night,” Aidan said, his voice flat and distant over the telephone line. “You didn’t show up at the bar.”

Malin hesitated, then decided she wanted to tell him in person. “I turned in early.”

“Right.”

“Hung over?” she asked.

“Said I was quitting.” He paused. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Is Gabie there?”

“They decided to stay until tomorrow evening. Let’s do something.”

“I need some time to get ready,” Malin said. “We can meet at the beach—”

“Ready for what? Let’s skip the beach today, just for once. I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

When Malin hung up, she immediately felt rushed. An hour: no time to shower. She went back to the kitchen and finished her cup of coffee, picking at the plate of *casaba* and sliced pineapple between sips.

Her face looked puffy in the bathroom mirror. She’d forgotten to take her make-up off before going to bed. Malin wet her fingers under the tap and pinched her eyelashes to remove the mascara. When she tried attaching her hair in a pony tail, the elastic slipped and fell to the floor. She gave up and let it fall over her ears.

The sound of the front door. He’s early. Figures.

“Hello?” Aidan said from the living room.

“Bathroom. You’re early.”

“No need for anything. Hurry up.”

“Don’t rush me,” Malin warned, insisting on the first word.

Nothing.

“What do you want to do now?” she asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Aidan said. “Anything.”

She heard him move a pile of CDs, then walk toward the bathroom. “Café?” she suggested.

Aidan’s face appeared in the doorframe. “No,” he said, “tired of that too. Let’s walk to the castle, something.”

Malin shrugged.

“Heard from Wells yet?”

She shook her head.

“I’m sure he’s just taking time with his family and all that.”

“Grab the plastic bottle,” Malin said, pointing toward the kitchen, “and fill it with water. From the pitcher in the fridge.”

“Have you ever been to the monastery?” Aidan asked as he straddled his moped and handed Malin a pockmarked helmet.

“Which one? I’ve been to the Kastro,” she said. “I don’t need this,” pointing at the headgear.

“You should wear it.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

Aidan shrugged and strapped the helmet to the rack behind the seat. “Not the fortress,” he said, “Agia Elesia.”



Malin jumped behind him. “*Bra*. Let’s go.”

Aidan drove steadily, but the pothole-riddled road to Livadi forced Malin to hold on to him tightly. They passed dozens of crumbling houses built upon ruins of crumbling houses, rows of olive trees and ravines crawling with desiccated grapevines. The Myrtidhion forked just outside of Livadi, and they headed west onto a smaller road in worse condition still. “Thank God I didn’t wear that helmet, or I would’ve cracked your head open,” Malin said. They drove through Kominianika, then Pourko where Aidan pointed at the Byzantine church of Avios Dimitrios. The road began climbing steeply after that. Once Malin set eyes on the steep, craggy mountain ahead, it was all she could see until they reached its foot. Aidan turned off the engine and stood solemnly looking up.

“Want to go up?” Malin asked.

Aidan nodded, shouldered his knapsack and took the lead climbing the snaking path up the mountain. A few minutes into the hike, Malin wished Aidan would speed up a little. She kept her eyes focused on his dust-caked hair; she did not want to spoil the surprise of the view from the top. Aidan’s breathing grew laboured and his moist neck was reddening. “You’re going to burn,” Malin said. “Want some lotion?”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re almost there.”

They heard footsteps. Two women appeared above, coming toward them. They wore heavy black, ankle-length wool dresses, black scarves, shoes and socks, and a few layers of black sweater. One of the women nodded at Aidan and Malin, smiling as she passed by them on the path. Her teeth look like brown stalactites, Malin thought.

The path became a darkened tunnel dug through the side of mountain. It suddenly felt good to get a break from the heat of the sun. They emerged on top of the mountain, next to the

whitewashed church. Aidan sat on a rock, out of breath, and searched his pack. “You want a *Mythos*?”

“I’d *share* one. Weren’t you supposed to have quit anyway?”

He pulled a green bottle from the bag, opened it, and handed it to Malin. She took a long draught. The coldness of the beer made her throat tighten. “Look at these,” she said, pointing at a patch of small, leafless, yellow flowers.

“*Semprevivas*,” Aidan said. “They grow on mountaintops here. They’re strange. They never wither.”

“How did you hear of this place anyway?”

He seemed to think for a moment. “The summer Gab and I moved here—almost three years ago now—anyway, the first week, people in town were talking about the celebration on top of the mountain. We followed our neighbours here. It’s one of my first Kythera memories.”

“Another Saint’s feast?”

“Weird story. Haven’t you heard it?”

Malin shook her head.

“Agia Elesa fled the Peloponnese and came to Kythera to become a nun after her father supposedly refused to let her marry the man she wanted. But he pursued her here and she climbed this mountain, the story goes, and begged God to open the earth so she could hide.”

“It does sound familiar,” Malin said.

“Her father was already waiting for her there. He tortured her, whipped her and hung her from a carob-tree before decapitating her.” Aidan paused and looked at Malin. “Her grave is right there, next to the church.”

“So what’s the celebration, then?” Malin asked.

“Well, every first of May, people gather here for a feast and they stay in the church. A day of remembrance, I guess.”

Aidan got up and walked to the fenced-in courtyard. Malin followed him and stood silent for a moment. “Jesus,” she said. “Look at the view.”

“On a good day,” Aidan said, “you can see all the way to Kaladi this way and *almost* up to Agia Pelagia that way.”

She leaned on the fence. The western coast of the island, barren and forlorn, spread out below all the way to the Mediterranean with only the occasional patch of green. The sea breached the land in long, icy blue fingers.

“I’ll pick you up at eight,” Aidan said when he dropped Malin back at the house late in the afternoon. “And I’ll be there this time, I promise.”

Malin debated whether to call Yiannis. She glanced at the answering machine. No calls. She thought about Wells. Screw Yiannis, she decided, but then heard shuffling outside. He was coming to apologize. She tiptoed to the couch and lay down. Now that Yiannis was there, she did not feel like talking to him. Malin heard her name being called out. She remained still, hoping he would not come looking through the window and see her there. She shut her eyes, pretending to sleep. He’d buy that. She heard a piece of paper being slipped under the door. Malin waited for a moment, making sure that he had left, and picked up the note. The nerve, she thought, reading it.

Malin paced the room, letting a few minutes pass, then stamped down the road toward Kapsali in the late afternoon sun, rehearsing her speech. When she reached the Raikos Hotel, she saw a man sitting on the terrace of the bar. He looked younger than she remembered, or

maybe thought he should, and this surprised her. He wore shorts, a t-shirt and sunglasses. Eric Calloway, the New York business consultant, stood up when he realized she was there. “Malin.”

“How can anyone be so arrogant,” she said loudly. “You followed me to the house?”

This evidently took him aback. He fumbled for a second, then seemed to brace himself before speaking. “I asked around for you. The waiter at *Pierrot* told me where you—”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t *want* anything. I was just coming over to apologize.”

“What for?”

“For how I came across on Thursday. I didn’t mean to, but I didn’t—Will you please sit down and have a drink with me?”

Malin stared at him for a moment, feeling the anger drain out of her. He seemed nice, almost trustworthy again. “One drink,” she said. “Speak quickly.”

Eric nodded to the bartender and pointed at his glass. “I came looking for you because I felt bad for what happened on the boat.”

“Nothing happened on the boat,” Malin insisted.

“I know, but you thought I was—I mean I was...”

“So what are you apologizing for?”

The man paused and small wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes when he frowned. “I don’t usually—ever—do that.”

Malin thought she’d ask what he meant, but what did she care, really.

“I’m married, you know. And my wife is great.” He took a sip from his drink. “But I’m bored. I can’t help it. Just bored. Love my job, I have a great house, I travel. When I saw you

on the boat, I felt like talking to you, and I did. On impulse. The first spontaneous thing I'd done all week. All month maybe."

"You love your wife?" Malin asked.

"Very much. I think about her all the time when I'm away."

"So it's good then," Malin decided. "Everybody is bored anyway. That's life."

Eric confessed to writing his wife's name in the sand with a stick every time he found himself on a beach somewhere. That's sweet, Malin thought. Trite, but sweet.

"Do you know what that is, over there?" he asked, suddenly calmer, pointing toward the water at an offshore rocky outcrop.

"That's the *Avgo*," Malin said, " 'The Egg.' They say that's where Aphrodite was born. Just sprang from the sea foam."

"I guess I just haven't figured out the recipe yet," he said, serious again.

"The recipe?"

"Yeah, the recipe for making it... *work*, you know."

Malin thought about this for a second.

"One thing that's for certain," Eric said. "Sitting in a bar, on Aphrodite's island, with a cool, Swedish beauty doesn't help."

On a Friday, Malin's father had told his daughter about the divorce. At twelve, Malin knew what the word meant but had not yet given much thought to what it meant to her. Walking home from school, it had seemed the perfect start to a promising weekend. The cold had finally abated, and her mother had allowed her to wear a skirt to school. Spring was in the air. Malin wanted to ask if Sara and Elen could come for dinner, maybe even sleep over. But she realized that something

was wrong from seeing her father's car in the driveway so early. She rushed inside and found them at the kitchen table, both wearing stark expressions.

"Sit down, *Gumman*," her mother said.

"We need to talk about something," her father chimed in.

And from then on, Malin knew everything would change. They both said that they wanted to treat her like an adult, that they weren't going to sugar-coat the truth. Her father had been having an affair with his secretary, and it had gone on too long. Malin's mother wanted another life anyway. She was moving to Chicago where Aunt Nina lived.

"What about me?" Malin asked.

"This is hard for all of us, Love," her father said. "Your mother won't leave tomorrow; I'll move into an apartment for a little while first, and you can stay in the house."

"We would both be happy to have you with us," her mother added, "but we want you to decide. You can even go back and forth for a bit. There isn't much of the year left at school."

Malin shifted in her seat. "Yes, but what about me?"

"Thank you, God," Aidan said when Malin opened the door. "High heels."

"What?" she asked.

"What is that? A skirt, a dress? You look great."

"What are you talking about?"

He looked at her. "I am tired of women who can change a tire, drink a few pints and pick a good melon. I want real women. This is perfect." Aidan smiled and pulled on one of his shirtsleeves. "You ready then?"

They drove to Kapsali in Malin's VW, Aidan insisting on taking the wheel. "I would've picked you up with the car if Gab hadn't left with it," he said. "You can't ride on a moped wearing this." Aidan parked alongside the curving waterfront. "Wait for me here," he said as he got out of the car.

"Where are you going?"

"Wait."

Malin watched Aidan walk down the street, throwing a few *ti trehi*'s along the way. This had to be Malin's favourite thing about Aidan: He had the most improbable, eccentric plans. What the hell is he doing? she wondered when he walked into *Hydragogio*. Aidan came out a few minutes later carrying a large basket and a bottle of wine, asked her to take off her high-heels, then waved for her to follow.

They walked the crescent-shaped beach to the large rock at its eastern tip. Aidan climbed first, then helped Malin up. She wondered where he was taking her—she would have been happy with previously charted territory—but she obliged. They followed a thin strip of sand, their shoulders brushing against the large rocky cliffs on one side, the sea on the other, warm sand underfoot. The water, thick, oily and slick, raised and buckled in gentle waves. Aidan grabbed Malin's hand and led her to a darkened recess within the rocky wall. In complete darkness, Malin heard him search the basket for something. "Are we eating here?" she asked.

"There," Aidan said as the light of a candle suddenly lit the inside of the cave, casting an ominous, dancing circular shadow on the ceiling.

Malin stood, staring at the multi-colored religious frescoes adorning the rough, grey walls. Aidan sat on the ground and pulled small carton containers from the basket. "Tomatoes and feta," he said, "*xhoumous* and boiled shrimp."

“Nice.”

Aidan nodded at the two plastic wine glasses as if to emphasize the fact that he’d thought of everything.

After the food, they both reclined, backs against the cool walls of the cave. “This used to be a chapel,” Aidan said.

“It’s great.” She looked around. “Now, do you want to tell me what happened with Yiannis?” Aidan frowned and Malin thought that his irritation seemed contrived. “He came over for dinner last night.”

“Did something happen?” Aidan asked, looking alarmed.

“Nothing in particular, just—I don’t know. You’re not telling me everything.”

Aidan ruffled his hair. Malin liked how he always did this when placed in an uncomfortable situation, the same way some people scratched their arms or were struck with a sudden, dry cough, the same way Wells pinched the skin on the bridge of his nose. These little things made everything seem less real in comparison.

“He said he was going to fuck you this weekend,” Aidan blurted.

“What?”

“I went out for a drink with him and he thought he remembered Wells leaving and, well, he said he’d—”

“Once is enough,” Malin said.

Aidan glared at her.

“Hearing it once.” *Den jäveln*, Malin thought. Not only did Yiannis assume I’d let him touch me, he even bragged beforehand. “And what’d you say?”



“Got pissed off. What do you think? I said you never would.” Aidan sat straight up.  
“Cheeky bastard.”

“So why did you make up this poker shit?”

“That’s true, too.”

Malin shook her head. “Who cares. Why didn’t you tell me this yesterday?”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“I just said—Are you listening?”

Nothing about this felt exceptional. So ridiculous, Malin thought. And yet she suddenly felt tired. Tired of this silly, pointless life, of this stupid, barren island in the middle of nowhere. Of waiting. Waiting for what? Moving to Kythera had seemed a capital idea. It was going to allow Wells and her to live together, to spend time together, to be free. She had wanted to stop running away and hiding on their respective continents behind their respective phones. And now it felt precisely as if this was what they had done. They were running from the seven AM alarm and the business luncheons, from days spent in a climate-controlled office and evenings sitting in front of the TV set. And Wells was gone. Again.

“I want to go home,” Malin said.

Aidan nodded and gathered their things. “It’s not—”

“I’m OK,” she said. “I just want to be home.”

They rode back in silence, Aidan driving so deliberately that Malin took it as a sign of repentance. “It’s not that bad, really,” Aidan said as he parked the car in front of the house.

“That someone’s telling people he’s going to fuck me, you mean?”

“I know. You want me to come in?”

Malin didn't answer. She couldn't decide whether she wanted him to or not. It didn't really matter to her now. Aidan followed her inside, bottle in hand, and went into the kitchen. He reappeared with two glasses. "Come on," he said, holding up one of the glasses, "you know he's full of shit anyway."

But if the two friends had fought over this, it had to be even worse than Aidan was now letting on. He just doesn't want to make trouble, Malin thought. They sipped the wine in silence. Malin knew she was above reproach for once, and this angered her even further. The arrogance to assume that she would cross her lover for him.

Aidan poured more wine in the glasses. "Mind if I put some music on?"

"No Leonard Cohen."

He tilted his head to read the titles of the CDs precariously stacked atop the stereo. He picked a Hank Mobley album and held it up, awaiting her approval. Malin shrugged. Wells loves this CD, she thought.

"My hair is shitte," Aidan declared when he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the darkened window. "Could you cut it?" he asked. "Please. If you don't Gabie will, and we both know what that means."

There were moments when Malin opened her eyes and was surprised at what she found. Moments when she resettled in her body after a moment of absence and felt as if a segment of time, a connection had been lost somewhere along the line.

The last time Malin had visited Wells in Montreal, before moving to Kythera, she had flown overnight and landed at Trudeau around dinner time. She felt dizzy and tired, but did not want to go home right away. In the car, riding into the city, she had kneeled on the car seat, kissing Wells' neck. "Let's catch a movie," she said. "Want to?"

There was a rerun of *The Godfather* downtown. Malin fell asleep halfway through the movie, exhausted, and woke up to a dark screen and a man in a three-piece pinstriped suit and hat aiming an antique rifle at them. People in the theatre were laughing. A re-enactment. Malin couldn't remember where she was or how she'd gotten there. She felt lost, and even Wells' hand holding hers seemed foreign and strange. She almost told him as they walked home in the delicate falling snow on Sainte-Catherine's, but she was too afraid that he would not understand.

And now she had her hands in Aidan's hair and this too felt suddenly strange, as if everything before had been erased, and all that existed was this moment. Now. Nothing before or after.

"Can you unplug a sink?" Malin asked, chopping a strand of hair.

Aidan nodded, and she noticed that his eyes were closed.

"Mind taking a look at the one in the bathroom after?"

There was something rousing about cutting Aidan's hair. Malin felt powerful standing behind him, pulling on a wisp and smoothing it between her fingers. She tugged harder on the occasional strand to feel him wince and draw his shoulder down. It made her feel in control.

"Feels amazing to have someone's hand in my hair," Aidan said.

"She'll come around." Malin wetted his hair with her fingers. "Probably just a rough patch."

"I guess."

"Our lives are so good here," she said. "But it's so repetitive too. Always the same thing. It's easy to get bored, or restless, don't you think?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Malin combed Aidan's hair. "I used to go pick berries in the summer with my father when I was little. We biked to this gorgeous field outside of Visby where our cottage was and I remember that I was surprised every time at how good fresh strawberries tasted. I couldn't get enough. My father got mad because my plastic containers never filled up. But I always reached a point where strawberries became the most disgusting thing I'd ever tasted, and I never wanted to eat another one for as long as I lived."

"Kind of like beer after a long night," Aidan said.

Malin paused for a moment. "The thing is, though, I never got sick. It's not that I ate too many. I just couldn't enjoy them anymore, and I hated myself for it. I knew I'd have to give them up for a while if I could ever hope to want to eat them again."

He turned around and smiled at her. "You're fucked up."

"It's just a clump of hair with toothpaste," Aidan said, dropping the guilty wad in the wastebasket. "Should be good now. How long has it been like that?"

"Months."

"Why didn't Wells—"

Malin looked at him.

"Right," Aidan said. "Not exactly the manual type."

She could not believe it would have been that simple. All this time. Waiting. It seemed the perfect metaphor for her life. "Give me a minute," she said and went to the bedroom.

Malin slid open the bottom drawer of her nightstand and pulled out the brown cigar box her father had brought back from Cuba just before leaving her mother. Everything was still there: Wells' silver razor, his shirt button, the rusted key of the old cottage, her father's watch,

the kidney stone, Elen's beaded necklace and Petr's folded silk tie. She carefully placed the wisp of cut hair she held in her hand next to the wooden ring and quickly closed the top.

## THIRTEEN

Later that night. “And how do you say, ‘How much does this cost?’”

Malin shook her head. “*Vad kostar det?*”

“No,” Aidan said triumphantly, “it’s—” he traced the line in the European travel guide with his index finger, “*Hurr MUK-keh KOS-tur deh.*”

She laughed out loud. “Why do you say it like that?”

“They have a ‘how-to’ pronunciation column.” He stared at the book. “*TA-luhr du EHN-ehls-KU,*” this time stressing the accent for comedy.

Malin laughed again. “*Eng-el-ska,*” she said. “Do Greek.”

Aidan flipped pages. “*Dhen DRO-o gha-lak-to-ko-mee kah pro-EEON-dah.*”

Malin frowned, puzzled.

“‘I don’t eat dairy products.’ Very useful for your lactose intolerant world traveler.” He put the book back on the bedside table and lay down. Malin sat next to him. Aidan patted the bedspread.

She stretched out on the small bed, careful not to touch him. This was fine. As long as he didn’t move.

“Can I ask you something?”

Malin turned on her side, resting her head on an elbow.

“Did Gabie tell you anything?” Aidan continued.

“About? No.”

“When you lie,” he said, “you always look off to the side.”

What was there to say, really? So she had seen Gabriella and Aley kissing, that was nothing. Curiosity. Too much wine. Malin had had a few of these herself, and it never meant that she had stopped being in love, or that she would be taking a big leap. A moment. That's all it was. "You know she loves you."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Aidan was right. She kept quiet for a moment. "I didn't thank you for dinner. It was really nice."

"That's okay," Aidan said. "I deserted you last night, after all." He turned on his side to face Malin. "You still hungry?"

She shook her head. Aidan's cologne suddenly overpowered Wells', rising from the pillowcase. She didn't know anybody but her father still wore *Polo*. Malin felt a wave—nostalgia maybe?—travel through her body. Smell, she decided, is the cruelest of the senses.

"Would you do something for me?" Aidan said. The worry had lifted from his face; he seemed calm and focused.

Malin could feel the space his body occupied in the room. No wonder all these girls fall for him, she thought. Sure he was handsome—square jaw, shaggy hair—but he looked nothing like the men in magazines. Or even Yiannis. And yet, he just grabbed your attention like a muted television set left on at a party. "What's that?" she said.

"Can I—" he smiled embarrassedly. "Could you hold me?"

What was she supposed to say to that? After all, Gabriella wasn't being fair with him. And Wells would understand that Aidan needed the closeness. But then he wouldn't find out anyway. No use turning this into something it wasn't. She turned over on her other side, facing

the bedroom door, and, hand waving behind, motioned for Aidan to move up to her. When he put his arm around her chest, Malin felt his heat cover her entire back.

“Good fit,” Aidan said.

She just nodded. She wouldn’t feel guilty. Not about this. Malin did not want to be spooned by anybody other than Wells—the way he pushed his knees in the crook behind hers, how he tucked his arm under her head to get closer, so that no square inch of skin would be left untouched. Nobody could do it better than him. And yet when Aidan rested his hand just above the crest of her hip, she realized her resolve could be more precarious than she had originally thought. Malin knew she should ask him to stop, but she did not *feel* it. She would’ve wished for a sharp flash of indignation—at least a lingering reluctance—but she felt nothing; just his hands lifting her shirt and coming to rest on her breasts. “Where did you meet Gabriella?” she asked.

“You’re asking now?”

“Tell me,” Malin said, unwavering.

“In Dublin.” Aidan ran a finger down her side, the inside of her forearm. “She was living in a tiny flat, trying to convince herself that she could do without her family’s money. She worked in the pub across from Trinity College. I met her on Bloomsday.”

“She must have stuck out.”

Aidan hummed in agreement and bit the flesh of her neck delicately.

Malin had been on to Aidan from the moment he had introduced himself to her.

She and Wells had been walking on the beach one afternoon, a week or two after having settled in town. Wells pointed out a couple to her. The woman was tall and slender, with almost



awkwardly broad shoulders. Her delicate skin contrasted sharply with the leathery texture of the man's reddened face. His shoulders had turned scarlet and it, along with his short legs and small, soft belly contributed to making the two appear conspicuously mismatched.

When Wells brought them to Malin's attention, she had to agree: it was hard not to feel like something about them as a couple stuck out. But as she stood there, clandestinely staring at the couple, Malin noticed how the man walked, assuredly holding the woman's hand close to him, casually nodding and waving at people as he passed. Something about the way he smiled comforted Malin. They would see these people again. She wasn't sure why—they could have easily been just passing through—but she knew. She told Wells she felt like heading back to the house.

A few days later, Malin went down to the market to decide what kind of fish to buy and bring home for supper, something she had offered to do to avoid cooking. She saw Aidan again, this time alone, pacing the narrow aisles and scrutinizing the merchants' offerings. Her heart began to accelerate. She thought about leaving before he could see her. She suddenly felt ridiculous in her bathing suit with nothing but a sheer sarong to isolate her from his gaze. Malin wanted to run home and bury her nose in Wells' hair, wanted him to hold her and keep her from everything and everyone. She just stood there, staring at shrimp and slimy octopus slowly rotting in the heat of the sun, their nauseating smell permeating the air.

"Sweden?" His voice startled her.

"Excuse me?"

"You're from Sweden," he said, "or Norway?"

"Yes. How do you—"

"Aidan," he said, putting out his hand. "Dublin."

“Malin,” she answered, extending hers.

Aidan took her hand between his. “*Chairo poly.*”

“What?”

“Nice to meet you.”

“I’m sorry. It’s nice to meet you too,” she replied lamely.

He ignored this. “What are you looking for? Fish?”

“I think so,” Malin said. “I want to surprise Wells. I told him I’d cook for him tonight.”

The last part wasn’t true. She wasn’t sure why she said it.

“Wells,” he said, pointing at his ring finger, “your husband?”

“Boyfriend,” she answered, immediately feeling like she was twelve years old.

“Partner—whatever you call it these days.”

“You usually cook?”

“He does. Most of the time. I’m worthless in the kitchen.”

“I don’t remember having seen you around.”

“Neither do I,” she lied.

“And you live here?”

Malin nodded. They both paused for a second, as if to contemplate this.

“It really is weird that we’ve not seen each other before,” Aidan said again.

“Maybe we did. Maybe we just walked by each other but didn’t notice.”

He shook his head.

“Then fate, I guess,” Malin said, not really meaning anything by it.

“I don’t have to be anywhere for a bit. Want to go walk on the beach?”

Pretty forward, she thought. “No, thanks. I do have to get back home.”

Aidan threw his hands up. “See you around then, Malin.”

“Maybe,” she said, smiling slightly. Malin nodded to him as she left. When she turned around, she could feel his stare burning the skin of her back and thighs.

When Malin had gotten home, Wells had asked about the fish. She had told him she’d forgotten.

After Wells had called from Montreal, in the morning, Malin hung up and Aidan straddled her, pinning her wrists down on the mattress. She knew the pyjamas would not suffice. Not this time.

The morning light cast its unflattering glare on everything in the room. Aidan’s torso seemed paler and more hairy than she remembered from the previous night. But she was glad for it. Malin wanted to see everything: the veins in his neck swelling with lust for her, his pupils dilating upon release. Darkness, she thought, would make me change my mind.

Aidan slid her pyjamas off, and she lay naked under him. And Malin did not care that her legs needed shaving, that she had not showered since the morning before. She was naked under him, and he would slide inside her and fuck her. Just fuck her. Aidan licked one of her nipples gently. His cologne suddenly resurfaced in the room.

Yiannis would never touch her. How had he dared assume she’d let him; what nerve to think she would’ve allowed somebody to do this to Wells, too. He can beg every day for the rest of his life, Malin decided. She pulled Aidan’s hair hard, and he bit the skin of her stomach. Malin wanted him to lick her; to experience her without the pretense of soap or scented cream.

There was no clumsiness or hesitation in Aidan’s movements, not even a trace of the usual male awkwardness in the way he used his fingers. A professional. Malin wanted him now,

wanted to feel the warmth inside her, wanted his stomach pressing against her back. She lifted her head to look at him, to see him kissing her legs feverishly. Aidan crossed her stare and immediately pushed himself up. He held Malin's head gently and placed a pillow under for her to rest on. Thoughtful. "There," he whispered before going down again. Malin went numb and felt sadness fill every bone in her body.

"What are you going to do? Who are you going to choose?" Elen had asked when Malin had told her best friend about her parents' impending divorce at the end of the summer. Malin had shrugged. Truth was, she did not want to choose. She wanted somebody to decide for her, wanted everything to be taken care of and nobody to be hurt. Elen wondered what would happen of the caterpillar collection, though Malin knew this was just a way for her to say she'd miss her if she decided to leave with her mother.

They had started chasing caterpillars in first grade for something to do in the summer. Malin liked to care for them, to feed them leaves and watch them crawl around the shoebox for which her father had made a screen top. Best of all, she liked to see the butterflies come out of their cocoons, some variegated and majestic, some plain and rather unremarkable, but all more beautiful than they had been in their hairy, former incarnations. It seemed to Malin the greatest of all of life's lessons that there was no telling what splendour could be found inside their long, crawly bodies. It made her look at Thomas, her handicapped neighbour, in a different light.

At thirteen, the collection had become a tradition, something of a symbol of friendship. Their fascination with the small creatures dwindled as that for boys grew steadily, but the summers spent playing in the forest and crawling in the fields of Gotland, remained dear to Malin. "Aren't we getting a little old for it anyway?" Malin asked.

This seemed to hurt Elen. “I know. I just thought—I’d miss you if you went.”

“I’d miss you too,” Malin said.

“But we could still call... and you’d come visit, or maybe I’d go see you in America.”

She nodded. That’s why she liked Elen so much. Later, after her friend had left, Malin walked outside and released all the caterpillars. “Go, find a new home. You’re free,” she had said, knowing her words were meaningless to them. After that she had cried, because she would never see Elen again.

The sun-baked buildings looked like cut-out squares against the paleness of the horizon. Malin and Aidan walked toward the square.

“You want to go for a swim after? Or maybe the market?” Aidan said.

Malin shook her head. “I’m too tired. I just want to eat and go back to bed.”

“Sleep?” Aidan seemed giddy with excitement. “On a day like this? It’s beautiful!”

When Malin sat down at the table, at *Niko’s*, her whole body suddenly felt heavy. She hadn’t slept well in almost a week now. The waiter nodded at them while clearing another table. Was this the one Wells had talked about, the one he found so friendly?

Aidan waved back at him. “No rush.” He turned to Malin. “What would you like?”

He looks so enthusiastic, so rested, Malin thought. None of this seemed cause for conflict in his world.

When the waiter finally appeared at the table to take their order, Malin thought that his geniality seemed contrived, almost duplicitous. She looked for something between Aidan and him—a slight nod of the head, a suspicious half-wink—that would confirm what she thought; men *always* brag. But the waiter hardly appeared to care, or even notice, that they would both be

sitting together, alone, on a Sunday afternoon. After all, this could've happened on any other day too. Aidan ordered *dolmades* and pasta. "I'll just have a glass of *rètsina*," Malin said.

The Irishman furrowed his brow, putting a hand on her thigh under the table. "You alright?"

"Fine." She moved her knee slightly and he took off his hand. "Did I tell you what Wells did last week," she said, trying to provoke a reaction with the name, "before he left?"

Aidan shook his head. "What?"

"He suddenly decided I had slept with someone—in the house—because he found one of his own condom wrappers in the trash."

"I know."

"I didn't know if I should be more insulted that he thought I would, or that I'd be disrespectful enough to do it in the house and stupid enough to leave evidence just lying about."

"Come on," Aidan said, "put yourself in his place. He knows how attractive you are. He should be nervous. He just didn't recognize the wrapper."

Malin felt a sudden flash of heat between her shoulder blades. "What are you doing?"

"What? He's my friend..."

"Some friend."

The food arrived and the plates, on the table, between them, made them both sit upright. Malin opened her purse and looked inside, pretending to search for something, then got up and pointed in the direction of the restaurant. "I'll be back in a minute." She could feel a migraine coming on; her mouth was dry, and the back of her eyes started to burn. She asked to use the phone and sat down at the counter, inside the *taverna*. Malin dialled a few random numbers and just sat there, holding the receiver. Wells had barely been gone four days. She could not believe

how easy it all was. Nothing changed or fell on her head. Nobody even looked at her differently. She looked at Aidan, eating at the table. He seemed unaffected, hungry. What are we, Malin thought, animals? If she could do it, what did it mean? She had discipline; she could even be stubborn. Who could be pure then, really? Malin hung up the received and walked back to the table.

“You know what’s really weird,” Aidan said.

Malin sat down, pretending not to hear.

“I just heard somebody at that table say that it’s impossible to lick your own elbows. And I think he’s right.”

She laughed. “You are such an idiot.”

Aidan smiled and pointed at the *dolmades*. “I saved a couple of grape leaf rolls for you. You should eat a little.”

That was the thing about Aidan: he was thoughtful. Malin wanted everything to stay the same. She wanted Wells to be back, and Aidan not to act differently around her. All of this was so trivial, so meaningless anyway. If only Wells could come back.

“Hey, Babe.” Gabriella and Aley appeared from behind, all smiles and elbow poking.

“Oi!” Aidan said, pushing his chair back.

Gabriella playfully put a hand on Malin’s shoulder, and walked to Aidan. She hiked up her skirt a little and winked at Malin—did she know anything?—as she sat on his lap and kissed him, caressing his neck.

Aley pulled up a chair and sat next to Malin. “Where’s Wells?”

“Went home for a few days—”

“Hello, Love,” Aidan said.

Malin looked at them, then at Aley again. “Did you have a fun trip?”

“Until now,” she said jokingly, nodding toward the couple.

Aidan was kissing Gabriella without restraint. Malin didn’t know whether to feel relieved or insulted.



## FOURTEEN

Losing her virginity had not been anything remarkable for Malin. She had heard many accounts, at first through friends of Jessica, Elen's older sister, then from other girls at the *gymnasiet*, of that first time, and most seemed tinted with such drama that Malin figured them all to be exaggerated. Few, if any, fell between the exceedingly wonderful (multiple orgasms, roaring fire) and the horrifying (embarrassing premature ejaculation, smelly underwear), which she found suspect.

And then the story she had heard repeatedly, but always with subtle variations: the girl was either from Uppsala, Nynäshamn or Lund, and had been dating a boy for anywhere between five months to three years without so much as a kiss (she was, apparently, very religious), before deciding she could no longer decline his advances. One evening, she announced that the day had finally come. Ecstatic, the boy picked her up in his parents' car (Skoda, Saab or VW), drove through the city, and parked at the end of an abandoned lot, somewhere on the edge of town. The girl nervously climbed into the back seat and lay on her back. The boy undid his trousers and pulled out something *this long*. "This long" was one of the few consistent elements of the story, always the distance between two hands placed about one shoulder's width apart. Trying to appear collected—and presumably not knowing if this was normal after all—the girl pretended not to notice. After that night, the story went, the girl had had to walk with crutches for the rest of her life, forever attracting attention to herself—the inconspicuous waddle certifying that she was indeed *that girl*. Some even swore they had a cousin who knew her, or a friend who had once met her at a party, or maybe even at church.

But Malin figured her chances of being crippled in the act were likely as good at those of being “bowled over by transcendental waves of ecstasy” (Jessica’s words). Some girls talked about waiting to feel ready, to find the right boy. But why wait, really? Malin did not share the eagerness, curiosity or even apprehension. She simply knew it had to be done and preferred expediting the matter. She did not feel any pressure yet, though she expected it would undoubtedly come, at least for the late bloomers. Malin never even thought about discussing it with her friends or pretending it was nothing, like some of the older girls did, hoping to gain some reassurance through collective ignorance. She just did not want to have to think about it.

That summer, they—the whole family and Elen—went to Gotland and spent a week at the cottage in Visby for the last time. Malin’s mother spent hours wrapping the silverware in neat little packages and piling them in boxes, like pyramids of beige cigars, on top of the old service set that had been in the house, it seemed, forever. The whole week felt poisoned with the feeling of impending change. They were there together, but things already felt different.

Malin and her friend swam in the creek behind the house; they biked in the fields for hours and shopped in town. But every night, Malin dreaded going to bed, knowing the whispers she could hear coming from the room upstairs were wedging her parents, and her life, further apart. Days spent in a sort of quiet daze: her mother busy getting the house ready for sale and her father waking up every morning before sunrise, opening the door to the girls’ room to check on them. He was gone until lunchtime, Malin assumed, to walk the white beaches so that his feet would remember what family felt like.

Her father did not want to keep the house. “Too expensive,” he said. And too big for just the two of them, even if Malin stayed with him. Worse if she went. He sometimes talked about getting a summer place in Lagos or Cádiz, but even at twelve, Malin understood that the south

was, to her decidedly northern father, something of a promised land better left unexplored, a necessary mirage, and she partook in the fantasy as an act of loyalty toward her father, though she never actually believed in it.

Toward the end of the week, Malin and her friend met two boys from Copenhagen at the beach. Jonas and Leif, both in Sweden for the Naslund hockey summer camp, looked about seventeen, though the girls didn't ask. Leif came to talk to Elen, and so Malin naturally drifted toward Jonas, whom she found more intriguing, with his dark hair covering one side of his face. Malin told Jonas about the divorce and possibly moving to America. The boy listened carefully, in turn explaining that his parents should've divorced years ago but that they likely never would find the courage to, that she was lucky to be going to America because that's where he wanted to go to play in the National Hockey League to win a Stanley Cup.

The four strolled the streets of Visby, going in and out of shops, stopping for a popsicle or a soda. It quickly became obvious that Leif seemed to like Elen and that pleased Malin, but she could see that her friend was growing a bit uncomfortable with the attention, so Malin periodically moved closer to the pair and rejoined the conversation. Elen smiled at her, thankful.

"We were going to go camping tonight," Leif said one afternoon. "You know a good place?"

Malin told them about the forest behind the old church, and they agreed to regroup after dinner.

Back at the house, Elen wasn't convinced about the plan. "Leif's nice, but they have to be at least eighteen—maybe more." Malin assured her there was nothing to worry about. Besides, they were both thirteen now: not so young anymore. If Malin had sensed that Elen truly did not want to go, she would've agreed to stay home. But she felt like her friend was asking her

to insist a little, to reassure her. “It’ll be fun,” she said. “If they’re a bore, we’ll just slip out. Or maybe come back to scare them after?”

They headed out on their bikes with their packs in the evening, the July sky still bright and full of peppermint pink and tangerine orange, the air smelling of pine needles and salt. They pedaled smoothly along the flat cobblestone streets. Malin closed her eyes to see how long she could ride without losing her balance or hitting something. The air on her face felt as warm as her skin. Then the realization that they would not be there for *Medeltidsveckan*—the medieval feast in August—for the first time in as long as she could remember. “Maybe I’ll buy a house here when I’m older,” she said, passing Elen on her bicycle.

The boys had put up a tent and started a fire, though dark had not yet fallen, and one could not sit anywhere near it without breaking into a sweat. Malin chatted with Leif but then moved over to let Elen sit next to him. The two girls had expected to be offered vodka or beer, or at least cigarettes. But it quickly became apparent that despite being older, the two boys were likely not as intrepid as they would have liked the girls to believe. Unlike Jessica and her friends, they did not drink or smoke because it would have affected their game, they said. They were polite and considerate, tame even, offering the girls water or cookies, a blanket to sit on. Although Malin knew this would make Elen feel safer, she could not help but be disappointed. She had been hoping for a memorable night, something different, exciting to mark her departure.

They went to sleep sometime after dark, lying side by side in the tent, each wrapped in their sleeping bags like the knives, forks and spoons Malin’s mother had spent the week wrapping in perfect rolls. Malin woke up when a drop of water hit her squarely in the face. At first she thought it had begun to rain, but she could hear nothing outside other than the crickets and the swelling of the sea. When her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw the beads of

condensation above her: their combined breathing mingled and materialized on the ceiling of a 200 *krona* nylon tent. Malin knew what she had to do. She climbed on top of Jonas, careful not to wake the others, and kissed him; little pecks on the mouth, at first, then with her tongue when he opened his eyes. Jonas' tongue rolled with hers, confident in its motions. This was easier than she had thought. "Come," she whispered in his ear. He nodded and slipped out of his sleeping bag, also careful not to disturb the others' sleep.

Malin led him by the hand, and they walked for a moment. The forest floor felt cool and humid under her feet, and the prickly weeds on her legs real. "Where are we going?" Jonas asked. He wore boxer shorts and a New-York Islanders t-shirt.

Malin pushed him against a tall pine and kissed him, pressing herself against his body. Jonas' breath tasted of peanut butter and candy. Malin took a few steps back and removed her nightgown. She stood before him, naked in the night. "You want to?"

Jonas nodded. "But I don't have a..." he hesitated, "you know—"

"Doesn't matter," Malin said. She kneeled on the ground and motioned to him. "Come here."

Thinking back on it the next day, at the house, Malin was amazed at how unremarkable it all had been. Jonas had been patient and gentle, if a little awkward, but Malin had felt almost nothing. No pain and no pleasure. But at least she had done it and would never have to worry about it again.

Before taking the ferry back to Stockholm, Malin and Elen went swimming one last time. They ran to the water and dove in, then raced to the rock where they often sat in the sun. Elen reached it first, as always, only this time Malin kept going. She swam and swam, swam as far as

her body would let her, kicking with her legs spread as wide as possible, hoping the salt water would make its way inside her and drown the baby she thought had to be already growing there.

Not a bad feeling to realize you've missed someone, though fodder for thought, to be sure. Malin took this as a sign—she had wanted, even pushed Wells to leave so she could find herself alone again and see how that felt. She had not expected anything to change, really; just the space to allow her to regain her own balance. But even though he had scarcely been gone a few days, she woke up excited and a tad nervous, in the middle of the night, on the day he would be flying back. Unusual for me, she thought, to actually hear the alarm clock go off. At four AM, she had already been awake for more than an hour, thinking. She wondered whether Wells had decided to visit with his parents or not, if he had had lunch downtown in that little vegetarian restaurant she liked so much—what was it called again?—that overlooked Sainte-Catherine's.

A year before, they had sat eating fried tofu, absorbed by the group of kids across the street, all sporting oversized hockey jerseys, trying to collect money for some charity, a trip maybe. They each received more smiles of sympathy than money, it seemed, though the occasional loony would send them hurtling back toward the group, delighted and proud. Malin kept her eyes on a little girl beside the group. She looked younger and frailer than the boys. Maybe she was just one of the players' younger sister. Or maybe she did play on the team, the only girl in the league. Nobody would give her a lesson, Malin thought; pony-tailed and coy, she looked every bit the part of the distressed child. The girl stood there, quiet and downcast, her face briefly lighting up every time she heard the metallic clink of money hitting the bottom of her metal container. She never congregated with the others or peeked in her pail; she just stood, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, and waited for the people to come to her.

When Malin got out of bed, she turned all the lights on in the house and had a look about. She changed the sheets, picked up the scattered clothes laying here and there, gave the kitchen a quick sweep and cleaned the bathroom sink. Wells probably wouldn't have cared or noticed, but she wanted him to feel welcomed at home, to feel wanted. I must look like a mad woman, she thought, running around a fully lit flat at four in the morning. "*Bienvenue à le maison*," Malin spoke softly. She tried to picture Wells' mother and remember how she had said it when greeting her for the first time, evidently wanting to make it clear that French was in her son's blood. "*La maison? Le maison?*" Malin whispered as she ironed the tight, yellow dress that Wells liked so much. Gender was always the hardest; there seemed to be no logic to it whatsoever.

Driving to the airport in the late morning, the whirr of the VW's diminutive engine traveled through the hull of the rusted car and up Malin's spine. The bug won't last very long, she thought. And what then?

The smells of the city—bread, perfume, garbage—filled the car. Malin surrounded by downtown Athens at noon and nothing could get to her. All she could think about was how to get out of there, to stop waiting for the world to come to her and take a concrete step instead. To hell with Greece, she said out loud. She did not need sunshine and lazy afternoons every day of her life. It was like eating too many strawberries; you just got over the craving after a while.

It suddenly felt like such a waste of time. Malin was ready. Her whole life she had been running away—from her mother to her father, from one city to the other, from men and loneliness. I'm mad, she thought, excited. Everything has been just a prelude for this. Here I am. She picked up her mobile from the passenger seat and dialed her mother's number. This

time her mom sounded half-asleep, but glad that Malin had called back. “Everything fine, *Gumman*?” she asked. “You sounded a tad unnerved the other day.”

Malin put the phone to her other ear. “Listen, *Mamma*. I am sitting in traffic, in Athens, on my way to pick up Wells at the airport and I just realized: I love him.”

Malin’s mother kept silent for a moment, as if she were expecting more, or perhaps thinking that her daughter had finally lost her mind. “Well, I—”

“No, I mean I *love* him.”

Her mother laughed with delight. “Good, *Gumman*. Good.”

“There was this little girl,” Malin said. “She was so lovely, and she touched my hair—wooah!” Malin gave the steering wheel a quick turn with her free hand. The car had drifted toward the sidewalk.

“Malin?” her mother said.

“Yes... I’m tired. I want a little girl like that. Or a boy. And I think maybe I want to marry Wells.”

“Have you talked about this?” Malin’s mother asked, sounding happy but very surprised.

“No—listen, he’s been gone. But I want to move back.”

“Here?”

“Maybe Sweden. Or Montreal. Doesn’t matter. Just—somewhere real.”

“That’s unexpected, coming from you. But good. Very good.”

“I don’t want to end up like you and Dad... well I—”

“I know,” her mother said. “We had it, but we just let it slip away, you know?”



“I know. And I don’t want that to happen to me... to us. I am almost there, Mom. I will talk to you soon, OK?”

Shutting off the phone, Malin looked around. The city felt different. The paralyzed circulation, the piercing sound of the mopeds skidding by, the tacky gift shops selling overpriced, ridiculously inaccurate miniatures of the Parthenon or the Temple of Zeus; fast-food stands and greasy gyros and fried potatoes.

Some things come to life only the moment you let them. After telling her mother everything, Malin ached for Wells, for the gun-metal grey skyline of Montreal, the crumbling old churches and green meadows of Gotland. She could feel it in her bones.

When she parked the car at El. Venizelou, she hoped the flight hadn’t been delayed. It was just like her not to have called before leaving. Had he made the tight connection? Malin tilted the rearview mirror down toward her and arranged her hair—a bobby pin here, another there; she pinned a blue flower on the side—then smoothed out her dress. A little lip gloss, and she was ready. Walking into the airport, she couldn’t remember the last time nervousness had made her so happy.

Crowded and chaotic are the first words that came to mind when Malin entered the large building. She couldn’t remember what airline Wells had flown or where the layover would be. She hadn’t even really paid attention when he had told her, assuming she’d work it out when she needed to. But what if she couldn’t find him in the airport? Ridiculous. She had her phone. He would know to call. Malin stood by an arrivals gate and waited to see the people coming out of it; nothing at first, then a group of Asian teens. A brief lull. The doors opening again and a dozen old women. An organized trip? She waited to see if the crew would come out. You could always tell the airline from the crew: tall, blonde: Lufthansa or KLM; dark, beautiful and

smiling: Thai air, and so on. She waited, but they never appeared in the door. Maybe she'd missed them.

Malin began walking toward another gate, and she saw him, standing around, searching for her. Wells looked handsome in his rumpled clothes, unshaven, his skin a shade darker still. She ran toward him, knots in her stomach, not thinking about her dress or her hair, undaunted by the possibility of attracting cynical looks to herself by running toward her beau in the middle of a busy airport and jumping in his arms. She tried to contain herself, but "I missed you" were the first words out of her mouth. Wells smiled at her and kissed her forehead. Malin felt the warmth of his lips on her skin for minutes after he pulled back. He looked exhausted, shaky. She held his hand and they walked slowly to the baggage claim, staring at each other. Malin tried to imagine waking next to him for the rest of her life. The thought did not even scare her.

Walking to the car, Wells pulled the little cart with his suitcase and an oddly-shaped cardboard box. What could that be? Malin asked if he wanted to spend the night in the city. Maybe they could go out for dinner, just the two of them and get a nice hotel room. "That sounds really great, Mal," Wells said, "but I feel like I just want to go home, you know? I'm really tired. Do you mind?" Of course she didn't mind. Malin opened the passenger's side door. "Can you drive?" he asked. Malin nodded and circled the car.

"You want me to drive," Wells said, looking at her. She smiled. He could always read her mind. Wells threw his stuff on the backseat and opened his arms. "Come here."

In a way, Malin was glad that he didn't realize how much it meant for her to sit in the passenger's seat this time. Or that he pretended not to if he did. One step at a time, she thought. "You're OK to drive, though?" she asked as Wells pulled the car out of the lot.

"I am," he said. "I can relax on the ferry. I've just been sitting for hours anyway."

There was so much Malin wanted to say, so much to tell him. How she had missed him, how she wanted to stay with him now. That she would go with him if he had to leave again. She even decided she wanted him to be the first to meet her mother. Even most of her friends hadn't. But then, Malin also enjoyed just being next to him, in the car, for now. She did not want to ruin the moment. Everything in time.

Malin climbed on her seat as soon as the car hit the highway in the direction of the port. She put her hand in Wells' hair and kissed his earlobe. "I love when you do that," he said. She played in his ear slowly with her tongue. Wells moaned. She whispered things she would have been embarrassed to hear herself utter. They both blushed. Wells looked at her. "I want to too. Let's just get home." Malin turned on the radio and "I Know There's an Answer" by the Beach Boys came on. She put her head down on Wells' knees. His clothes smelled like the stale air from the plane and his sweat. It really is love, she decided, when you miss somebody's sweat.

## FIFTEEN

Malin and Wells stayed home for the first few days after his return. Wells seemed weary and exhausted and didn't talk much. He slept later than usual and remained in bed much longer. Malin didn't probe out of respect. Jetlag, probably. Maybe something had happened with his family. His father could sometimes be quite harsh. She figured he would talk when he felt ready to. If he needed to.

This made the transition easier. Malin still felt she had to settle some things alone, but having Wells back also felt better. His smell in the room, in the morning, his shoes on the doorstep, always in the way. She liked to listen to him shower just before lunch, to hear the water ricochet off of his body and smack against the vinyl curtain. With the sound, she tried to imagine how he moved under the fine drizzle.

There is so much to take care of now that Wells has returned, so much to begin. The small closet in the bedroom looks like it held a nuclear bomb, Malin thought. She took everything off of the hangers and from the corners of the closet, laying each article behind her, on the floor, in a pile. Wells stirred in bed, but she didn't make any extra effort to be quiet—it was late anyway.

This black shirt with gold lettering: when's the last time I wore it? Two-three years ago? Left pile. The blue dress—a gift from Wells—closet. And so on for every single article of clothing Malin had accumulated over the last five years: expensive shirts she hadn't found the right occasion to wear until they suddenly weren't so fresh anymore, tattered jeans that had never really fit anyway. She set the limit at six months: anything that hadn't been worn in longer than that had to go, save for the few winter clothes she had managed to save. Let's be realistic, she

decided, I'm not going to pull this out in a year and suddenly want to put it on. There were certainly people who needed these more than her. She organized what she decided to keep—surprisingly little—and filled garbage bags with the neatly folded discards, to be dropped off at a mission in Athens the next time they drove into the city.

Later, when Wells went out for a swim, Malin tackled the kitchen. So much to do there too, despite its smallness. She thawed out the freezer and soaked the few shelves she could remove in the sink with dishwashing liquid, the way she remembered her mother doing in the large, brown, sunfilled kitchen of the house in Stockholm. Malin realized she had never, in her twenty-eight years, cleaned a refrigerator. Not really. She scraped the dust motes caked in grease behind the stove, dusted the blinds, everything. No better way to start afresh. She looked out the window, at the back of the kitchen. What a view. But this was supposed to be a kitchen, not a hotel. Where were the trees?

Sweeping the floor, Malin thought about her father. She wondered what he could be doing at the same moment, how he would feel about his daughter suddenly so domestic. She would explain to her dad that he had had it all wrong. Giving it your all isn't a sign of weakness or subordination; it means you're confident enough to give it a try. This he had never understood. "Don't ever let anyone get in the way," he always told her. Malin stopped in the middle of the room, broom in one hand and the rusted yellow dustpan in the other. The cigar box. She went into the bedroom and pulled it out of the nightstand. Wells wouldn't be back for another hour. Malin sat on the bed and opened the box. She picked up her father's old *Philippe Patek* and twirled it in her hand, then played with Elen's beaded necklace. None of these people would mind, she thought, if they knew I'd taken these things. But now it felt strange, maybe a tad insane. "I steal from the people I love," she said out loud, testing the words for their power.

What better sign of emotional stillness. In a sense, she had run away her whole life, just like her father had instructed her to do by not letting anyone stick their claws into her, but in another, Malin had also been holding on tighter than she had ever realized. No more, she decided. I'll return every single one of these things, except maybe Aidan's hair, which doesn't mean much. And her mother's kidney stone—she certainly hadn't missed it. Malin got up and threw the wisp of hair in the basket, but then picked it back up and flushed it down the toilet: no use creating a sequel to the condom scene for no reason.

Suddenly, she also felt like throwing away her pictures. All of them. They too were nothing but lies, snapshots of a former life which didn't exist anymore: her and Elen at the cottage in Visby that last summer; her mother holding a shopping bag, standing in front of the Sears Tower; Wells and his brother on their knees, playing with a friends' baby. None of these things mattered or meant anything anymore. She did not need them.

Malin heard the front door open and slid the cigar box under the nightstand. "You there?" Wells said from the living room.

"Coming," Malin said, then, "don't move."

Wells stood in the middle of the small room in his green board shorts, wet shirt unbuttoned, hanging off of his shoulders, toes full of sand in his tongs. "What?"

"Lean back against the door," Malin ordered.

"Why, Stalin?" Wells took a few steps back, towel in one hand and bottle of water in the other. "You're mad."

"Just stand there and don't move."

Silence.

Malin shut one eye and put her hands in front of her face, as if taking a picture with an imaginary camera. “There,” she said. “I want to remember you just like this, always. Let’s not take pictures anymore. Ever. Let’s make every day the best yet so we never will need to remember anything.”

Wells walked over to her and threw his things on the couch. He kissed Malin’s forehead delicately. “You really are crazy,” he said. “I’m going for a nap. You want to come?”

Malin shook her head. “I’m not sleepy.”

When, at the end of the week, Wells still hadn’t brightened up, Malin began to wonder. He had barely talked since returning, hardly said anything save the same Cohen nonsense—that he had seen him in Montreal, that he wanted to ask him something. But Malin needed to talk more than she ever had before, like a first time lover who wants everything exposed, every door opened so that no single little particle of her is left unloved.

The next morning, Wells called her in the bedroom. “Something wrong?” she asked.

“Sit down, please.”

Malin pulled a chair next to the bed, the cup of coffee warm in her hand. She had been waiting for this for days now.

“There’s so much I want to say, but I—” Wells sat up in bed. “It felt odd going home. Good in a way, but difficult too. Everything was still there: the streets, the University, my parent’s house, the jazz dive on Mackaye. Everything. But it also felt so foreign, different, and that scared me.”

Malin knitted her brow. “Give yourself a break. You were there for just a few days. You would have been fine in now time.”

“You don’t understand,” Wells said, his voice steady, assured. “I felt lost. Like I didn’t belong there at all anymore, and it stirred all these things in me; how I’ve wanted to leave since I was a child, how I could only see myself living abroad, in a country where I wouldn’t know a soul. I love Montreal, but I can only love it if I miss it, from a distance.”

Malin felt confused. What was he saying?

“I love you,” he said. “I want to stay here, with you. I never want to go back.”



## **PART THREE**

### **WELLS**

## SIXTEEN

This is great, Wells thought. Perfect.

They were all drinking at a busy beachside bar, striped green awning above them, techno music blasting from a makeshift dance floor a few feet away.

Malin had seemed moody and distant since he had returned, almost obsessively cleaning the house—something Wells couldn't even remember having seen her do before—and giving things away like a cancer patient getting ready to pass on.

But for the first time since picking him up at the airport, Wells realized, she was now smiling. Sitting at the bar, next to him, smoking her yearly cigarette, Malin wore the hat he had bought for her, and it fit her exactly the way he had pictured it.

"But how did your parents meet?" Malin asked Gabriella.

"My father was traveling in Columbia and—"

"He could leave Russia back then?"

Gabriella frowned as if she thought the question odd or ill informed. "Yes. Why?"

"Well," Yiannis said, joining the conversation, "it *was* a communist country."

"Some people could still travel."

This obviously didn't satisfy Yiannis. "*Some* people? What kind of people?"

Wells turned to Aidan, wondering if he would come to the rescue somehow, but he seemed distracted. He had hardly spoken all night.

Gabriella sighed. "You want to hear the story or not?"

"Go ahead," Malin said. "Please."

“My father had flown from Moscow and just landed in Bogota. On his way to the hotel, he—”

“But I still don’t get how he could leave,” Yiannis insisted.

Aidan suddenly sprung to life. He hit the bar with his fist and their glasses rattled loudly, startling everyone. “Are you going to shut the fuck up and let her finish the story?”

Yiannis raised a hand in Aidan’s direction. Yiannis mocked in an exaggerated drawl, “Easy there cowboy.”

Standard fare, Wells thought. We’ll never find out about her parents. But that was fine. Where else would he have rather been? And with whom? Nowhere. Nobody. He didn’t even really mind Yiannis, in the end. He had been chatting with him all evening and almost enjoying his humor, his stories. “So the reason I asked all of you to come out tonight,” Wells declared solemnly, easing the tension, “is that I have something to announce.”

Gabriella turned to Malin and grabbed her by the shoulders. “You’re pregnant?”

Malin shook her head and turned to Wells, a puzzled expression on her face.

“John,” Aidan said, two fingers up, “we need beer here.”

“Malin and I decided to stay.”

Gabriella turned to Malin again. “Were you going to leave?”

The statement did not have the effect Wells had hoped. “I mean *move* here, like for good.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Yiannis said, raising his glass. They all toasted, but Aidan seemed careful to avoid touching Yiannis’ glass. Malin suddenly looked sad. She’s tired, Wells thought.

Later that night, Wells and Yiannis talked at the bar. The tall Greek man leaned in close and pointed in the general direction of the dance floor, a square of packed gravel under a straw roof. “She’s a good girl. You’re lucky.”

“I know,” Wells said. “Thanks.” Nice of him, he thought. The fact that Yiannis could verbalize it probably meant he conceded defeat. “She is a terrible dancer, though,” Wells added and laughed. Aidan, Gabriella, Malin and Aley, who had just shown up, danced in a tight circle. Malin wore tiny shoes, barely secured to her feet by thin strips of leather that looked like gold dental floss. Wells couldn’t understand how she walked in the things.

Yiannis seemed surprised. “Wow, she really is.”

They both stood watching while Aidan scampered across the floor, gesticulating and miming to make the girls laugh: walking arms straight in front, as if pushing a grocery cart, pretending to shop, or looking back, waiting for an imaginary chair lift to take him up the ski hill, suddenly taking off with unexpected speed. The three girls danced around him, smiling and talking.

Malin’s timing just seemed off; her body moved in non-rhythmic waves, a stark contrast to the smoothness of her walking or even swimming. Aley, next to her, tilted her head back, eyes closed, and swung her pelvis from side to side slowly.

“Aley is quite graceful,” Wells said. “Check it out.”

Yiannis nodded, staring at her.

Wells wondered whether he should tell Yiannis about how she had come on to him at Aidan’s party. Would that be bragging? And so what if it were. It would only show Yiannis that he wasn’t the only man on the island whom girls looked at. “Think she’s good in bed?”

Wells heard coming out of his own mouth, immediately disgusted with himself. How childish. What if Yiannis had slept with her, how would he—

“I wouldn’t know.”

Relief. “I bet she is.”

“You do know she’s gay, though. Right?”

“She is?” Gay? How had he not figured that out? “No, I didn’t.”

“How could you miss that, man? She’s been hitting on Gabriella since she got here.”

“Boys.” Malin put her hands on Wells’ shoulders. “Doing OK?” she asked, looking at him.

“Lovely,” Wells said. “Just having a chat and a beer here.” He touched a bead of sweat on her neck, and it clung to his finger. “Don’t worry about me.”

Malin nodded and headed back toward the dance floor to the loud beat of an old Pet Shop Boys song.

When the music slowed, Aidan huddled the three girls together and pressed against the pack, circling them with his arms. Yiannis winced. “Gross.”

“What’s wrong with you two anyway?”

“He’s just so... fake,” Yiannis said.

Wells had first met Yiannis at a dinner party Aidan had thrown to welcome him and Malin to the island. Aidan had talked about Yiannis on many occasions before, saying that he was a bit vain and hopelessly trying to look the part of an American movie star, often lifting expressions and mannerisms from popular pictures, but also that he was a decent guy, hardworking and trustworthy. Because of this, Wells had always thought of them as good

friends. Probably not a relationship that would outlast their stay on the island—not Aidan’s anyway—but still something solid, reliable enough.

“I don’t get it. You always got along. Aidan’s about the most upstanding guy I know. He always talks in your defense.”

“To you? You need convincing?”

“I mean... what’s—”

“He’s just so full of shit.”

“How?”

“You want to know?” Yiannis paused and seemed to hesitate. “Well, just before you left, he said—”

“Oi! Will you two just quit mucking about,” Aidan said, walking toward them. “You look like two old ladies having tea. Come and dance.” He turned toward the crowded space delineated by four large speakers. “The girls are all over me.”

Wells and Yiannis looked at each other but neither moved. Aidan shrugged. “Fine. Stay there, then.” He ordered drinks for everyone.

As soon as he left, Wells forgot what Yiannis had been talking about. “Did I tell you I saw Leonard Cohen?”

“I saw him a bunch of times on Hydra, years ago. No big deal.”

“Me, twice in the same week, though.”

Yiannis obviously wasn’t impressed. “You think that means something?”

“Well, it probably means we traveled together. I saw him here before I left, and then in Montreal. Insane coincidence, don’t you think?”

Yiannis leaned against the bar. “Are you even sure it was him both times? Did you talk to him?”

“*Dhen Pirenzei*,” Wells said. “Never mind.”

Later still, all lined up at the bar, Yiannis and Aidan sat at opposite ends of the row of stools, and everybody talked simultaneously. Malin was starting to look sleepy, but the whole night she’d laughed and smiled. I could do this for the rest of my life, Wells thought. Why had he spent so much time worrying before? In the end, everything always turned out fine. Always. For money, he could teach English or tutor a few kids at home. That alone could probably bring in enough for food and rent—life on the island was cheap if you knew your way around. Or maybe he could try to write. It couldn’t be that hard. Plenty of books out there about your average guy moving to a foreign, exotic locale and trying to make do. He could even inject a little drama into it, make it livelier, more immediate: paint Gabriella as a hyperactive, chain-smoking Russian-Cuban model, Yiannis as an obnoxious but witty sex maniac with a fondness for very young girls, and so on.

I could become a kind of Greek Peter Mayle, Wells thought, and write overwrought pieces on the most trivial aspects of life here; buying food, walking to the beach, as if these were incredibly rich experiences always involving wild and eccentric characters. And who would he be? Probably best not to write yourself in, he decided. Too narcissistic. Better to spread the wisdom equally between characters. Makes it seem more even-handed.

He could build an entire plot around Aley and have her fall in love with Malin. Then a flash: Cohen could get him started on the book, direct him. What better guide?

Wells looked at his bottle of *Mythos* on the bar. By the blurriness of its edges and the heavy feeling in his legs, he understood he had drunk more than he had wanted to.

Aley and Malin stood there, talking. What if she's in love with her, Wells thought. That's something he just couldn't compete with. He tried to imagine sleeping with two women, to have Malin and Aley naked in front of him. He could picture his lovely Mal, one hand in her hair, looking at him coquettishly. He loved her strong legs, the smoothness of the waxed skin below her stomach. And then Aley, tall and pale, silver rings through her nipples. Wells was only able to imagine her leaning forward, her breasts suspended like two water balloons, butt sticking out. He felt tingly at the possibilities this allowed, at least for daydreaming.

But what if Aley really wanted to sleep with Malin? The thought of the three of them undressing together aroused Wells, but somehow, thinking of the two girls alone, without him, didn't. It wouldn't make any difference, he decided, if she slept with another woman or another man. I couldn't stand it.

Wells turned to look at her. He probably would have felt the uneasy tightness of jealousy in the pit of his stomach had he not been so drunk and tired. Gabriella sat on Aidan's lap, caressing his face, and Yiannis listened to Malin and Aley with undivided attention. Wells slumped forward, elbows on the bar, and rested his head in his hands.

When he opened his eyes again, Wells saw a man approaching Malin steadily. He wore ridiculous, expensive-looking plaid bermuda shorts with cuffs, leather loafers with no socks and a tight, mauve *Lacoste* shirt. There was something immediately suspicious about him, and Wells sat up, listening.

"Hey," the man said in a voice that betrayed familiarity. Wells couldn't remember having seen him before. How did Malin know him? The man reached into his pocket and pulled out something shiny that he handed to her. A key? An earring? "You forgot this at the hotel," he whispered just a tad too loud. Wells saw Malin creasing her forehead and glancing



sideways—an unmistakable sign of embarrassment. He felt a prickly sensation rising steadily, like the mercury of thermometer, from his heels, up the inside of his thighs and spreading across his perineum. He launched toward the man, a derailed steamer of determination.

The man swiveled in place with the clatter of falling stools, and Wells caught him off guard, fist connecting with his stomach. The stranger dropped to his knees, gasping for air. Everyone took a step back, dazed, as if maybe there were higher motives at play, purposes simply beyond their grasp.

The man, kneeling in the sand, diaphragm fluttering, struggling for an unrestricted breath. He looks like a baby, Wells thought. Just a baby.

A long second, then Malin's shrilly voice. "*Wells.*"

Another breach in time, the silence that follows an atomic explosion, and then Wells lost all sense of proprioception. He felt suspended in mid-air, arms and legs akimbo, waiting for something hard to hit from one side, for some kind of landing. A heavy hand on the back of his neck, pushing. Sand in his eyes. Aidan screaming, "What is wrong with you, mate?" A few rapid, shallow breaths. "Have you lost your fucking mind?"

## SEVENTEEN

Leonard Norman Cohen was born in Montreal on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1934. Wells remembered this for two reasons: Fall began on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and his father celebrated his birthday exactly a week before that—the strongest argument against astrology.

The other Cohen-related landmark for Wells: June 10<sup>th</sup> 1993. He had bought tickets for a concert at the old Forum at the suggestion of a girl he had met at a party—a girl whose name he couldn't remember now—and had offered to take her to the show.

They had made a night out of it. Wells picked her up and took her to a small Italian restaurant below street level, on St-Denis. A perfect place to bring a date, his friend David had advised. They ate greasy pasta and drank cheap wine bought clandestinely from the old waiter who seemed to make a lucrative business of providing desperate patrons, unaware that the restaurant was of the bring-your-own-wine kind, with a convenient alternative to scouring the streets for a bottle of red in between courses.

The girl took small, quick bites that she didn't chew in order to maintain the steady flow of her monologues, which essentially revolved around the adventures (or misadventures) of her girlfriends—*my bitches* she called them with surprising straightforwardness—or fashion advice she would freely dispense to the people she saw walking past the restaurant window. “I could dress people in the morning,” she said. “All day long.” And Wells thought that in this, maybe she was right. She looked cute that night, all tight body shirt and permed hair.

The girl told Wells that she had met his father once or twice—he owned the theatre where she worked as an usher on the weekends—and kept repeating how much she liked him. Wells hadn't been aware of this connection between them, and he became suspicious of her motives.

He had come across her a few times at various gatherings and parties, and she had always seemed indifferent to him before. What had made her suddenly decide to hint that she wanted Wells to ask her out? Was she expecting a promotion or some kind of raise out of this? Or worse, had his father set everything up for him?

One couldn't have asked for better seats at the Forum that night. Their padded folding chairs faced the center of the stage and straddled the red line on the ice underneath the floorboards. The girl was giddy with excitement. She loved "Chelsea Hotel" and couldn't wait to hear it live. Wells wondered how he'd gotten there, waiting for an artist he didn't know with a girl he didn't really like. But when Cohen came out on stage in his perfect Armani suit, looking more like a fashionable funeral director than a pop star, the evening turned around. The singer greeted the crowd warmly in French and launched into a gut-wrenching rendition of a song Wells later understood to be "Dance Me to the End of Love." He forgot all about the earlier part of the evening and his companion, about his homework, his parents.

In the large arena, people who looked like aunts and uncles wore turtleneck shirts or long skirts, glasses hanging securely from a colored nylon cord around their neck. Wells and his date had to be the youngest people in the crowd by about twenty years. And yet the smell of beer and pot smoke permeated the air. He wondered if his parents had ever smoked weed. Probably not.

Cohen stood in the middle of the stage, slightly stooped and eyes closed, singing in a baritone so deep that it felt as if every screw and bolt in the building would suddenly come loose and rattle; you could feel it in your kidneys. Cohen looked humble but confident, kind but solid. Exactly the image of himself that Wells tried to project. And the women clearly loved him.

After the show, Wells drove the girl home. When he pulled up in front of her house, she reached over and turned the ignition key, killing the motor. They both reclined in their seats and

talked in the darkened station wagon. She told him he had the sensitivity of a poet. She leaned over and kissed him. Wells had never kissed or been kissed by anyone before and when he felt her tongue, he suddenly wished that he could've liked her better.

Funny how mundane and unlikely events can leave the most lasting impressions. Now, almost fifteen years later, Wells could remember everything about that night, and the ticket stub still wedged under the mirror frame, in his bedroom, served as a reminder. Everything except for the girl's name.

*An island that time forgot.* That was the description of Hydra Wells had read before deciding to make the trip. Another travel guide cliché, no doubt. Yet as he stepped off the hydrofoil in Hydra Town, the conspicuous absence of cars and traffic noises, the people riding on donkeys struck him immediately.

He had seen *Boy on a Dolphin* years ago, the only movie he could find on Hydra, and remembered it now as he stood on the edge of the water, taking in the magnificence of the harbor, a coliseum of boxy stone mansions stacked along the craggy hillsides keeping watch over the shimmering blueness below.

Wells could've been Cohen, some forty-odd years ago, arriving on the island after having decided to leave the rainy bleakness of London on a whim because a friendly teller sporting a suntan had told him, in a branch of the Bank of Greece, that he'd just come back from Greece, where it was already "full spring."

Now what? Wells thought. He'd come all this way to find him, having carefully analyzed the situation. It seemed to him a fair exchange of services, a synergistic proposition: Cohen was reputed to be in financial difficulty. Wells could help with that. Should help. After

all, the man was an icon, a legend, a prophet of peace and a great ambassador for Canada. And then there was so much the poet could advise Wells on; so much more, even, than he had originally thought. Not only was Cohen's wisdom legendary, but their backgrounds and situation were so eerily similar.

Like Cohen, Wells had been born in Westmount to a well-to-do family and educated at McGill. And like Cohen, he had left. "Beware of what comes out of Montreal, especially during winter," Cohen wrote. "It is a force so corrosive to all human institutions, it will bring everything down." That line from an old poem had struck Wells who, in his early twenties, had scavenged the McGill library looking for interviews, newspaper articles, documentary movies, anything having to do with the city's favorite son.

Standing on the cobblestone boardwalk of the harbor, Wells shivered, suddenly recalling a few of these pictures and clippings. Our situations aren't similar, he thought. They're *the same*. Cohen had famously left Montreal because he could no longer bear the city, and he had not suffered culture shock upon arriving in Greece, as if it were the home that had always been waiting for him. Just picking up a cup, Cohen had told a reporter, you understood by the way it would fit in your hand that it was the cup you had been searching for your whole life. And so it was.

In Hydra, Cohen had fallen in love with Marianne, a young Scandinavian beauty. And Wells remembered having read of the moment the couple had split because Cohen needed to return to Montreal, and that, later, she had also flown there from her home in Oslo and had appeared at the airport with a fur coat and two large suitcases. In the same interview, Cohen spoke of Marianne's little Karmann-Ghia that she liked to drive too fast, of her Nordic cheekbones and terrific beauty. Wells even remembered an old black and white photograph of a

young and hip Cohen, posing nonchalantly in front of a row of caiques on the precise spot where he now stood.

In these interviews, Cohen always mentioned Marianne, even if briefly. There seemed to be a marked change in tone when he spoke of her too, as if he still missed her or perhaps regretted some of the things that had led to their breakup. He certainly made a point of telling the journalists that one only meets people of such substance, depth and quality once in a lifetime. Maybe he hoped that somehow the words would reach across the world and convince her to come back to him.

That's what Cohen could do for Wells, above everything else: give him insight on how to keep the greatest woman he had ever met. The poet had a shrewd understanding of relationships and the benefit of years of hindsight. He had had more, and lost more, than anyone Wells could think of. Malin deserved this, deserved the very best. After Wells' fickleness, his hesitation at moving, after having seen Anna in Montreal, and the latest embarrassing display of ego and primitiveness at the bar, in front of everyone, a few weeks before. So maybe the businessman from New York had not done anything wrong after all. Malin was still mad at him for that. And perhaps the condom he had found in the house really was his own. Wells felt he needed some outside assistance.

He loved Malin, but even he had lapsed. Considering this, it seemed almost impossible that she wouldn't too. Maybe not now, but at some point, because she'd be angry at him or just bored. Wells now recognized jealousy as a powerful force, much like claustrophobia.

On the boat, earlier, Wells had had to sneak into a bathroom to knock back a few swigs of ouzo from a small flask he'd brought along, just in case. It managed to smooth out the anxiety he felt at being trapped in the middle of the Aegean Sea with no possible escape, much the same

as in a plane. But at least being in the open air helped, and so did the view: rounding Neapoli that protruded from the Peloponnese, then the vast expanse of the Myrtoön Sea, an infinite, liquid desert, the boat being chased by gulls, soaring high above. A point on the horizon inflated slowly, turning into a giant rock; nothing to see but mountainous walls and barren cliffs. The boat made a sharp turn, and the narrow entrance into the horseshoe-shaped bay of Hydra Town appeared, guarded by ancient cannons and battlements on both sides. The bay, empty at first, then coming to life—water taxis, bars, restaurants, jostling sailboats—as the harbor came into focus. In the center, the tall and beautiful clock tower of a monastery, a marble candle, rose above the surrounding buildings. Yiannis had told him to watch for it, that it had been built of blocks taken from the Temple of Poseidon, god of the sea, on Paros.

There were no guesthouse owners waving signs of nightly rooms for rent in the harbor, as Wells had counted on and assured Malin there would be when he had mentioned the trip, the day before.

“You always book ahead on Hydra, especially on weekends,” she’d said. “That’s what everybody says.” Even mad at him, she cared.

“No need. There will be people jumping on the boats to offer rooms.” Wells had no idea what he was talking about. He had just trusted that everything would work out fine. Yiannis had also suggested asking around for a man named Pete, though he had assured Wells that he’d probably be the first person to greet him when setting foot on the island. Pete apparently seemed to live in the port. “A short Santa Claus” is how Yiannis had described him.

Pete was nowhere to be found. But the quayside, ringed with cafés, shops and restaurants seemed busy, so Wells grabbed his backpack and, like a man on a mission, joined the crowd.

From the harbor, he hadn't noticed how many of the shops were in fact jewelry stores. This depressed him. Not for the Hydriots, he thought. He stopped in front of one, a large display window jutting out above the walkway, dwarfing the door next to it. In the display case, perfect white sand (no doubt imported), various kinds of seashells and polished stones. Everything else—rings, bracelets, watches, necklaces—was gold, as if these had been found at the bottom of the sea by a team of fortunate divers, like the beautiful Sophia Loren and her husband in *Boy on a Dolphin*. Wells spotted a ring in the middle of the display. It looked unassuming when compared to the ones surrounding it, but he thought that Malin would like it. Never easy to buy jewelry for women; even if they hate it, they'll never say anything, and worse, wear it on every occasion out of guilt. But the ring was simple; wide, sort of thick, unadorned. Wells could see Malin wearing it. How would she react if he offered her a ring? Would she just take it as a gift or decide it meant something more? Did it?

“*Hahlo...*”

Wells looked down at a little blonde boy pulling at his pants' legs. “Hey kiddo,” he said. “You lost?” The boy nodded and offered Wells a lollipop he'd been sucking on. “Thanks.”

A couple walked out of the *taverna* next door, the woman looking at Wells with an expression halfway between embarrassment and alarm. “*Thomas!*” she said sharply for the little boy then looked up. “Sorry about this.”

“No harm,” Wells said. “He's very cute.”

The father nodded and handed the boy a teddy bear that looked like it had been mangled by a dog; one arm missing, mismatched buttons for eyes, the fur tattered and faded. “He love this thing,” the man said in a thick German accent.

“The food good there?” Wells asked, pointing at the *taverna*.



The man and woman shrugged simultaneously. “OK,” the woman said.

Wells nodded. “Thanks.” He patted the boy on the head and gave him back the lollipop. “Have a good day.”

Wells felt uncomfortable when the waiter of the restaurant greeted him in English and sat him down at a small table to the rhythm of the theme song from *Zorba the Greek* blasting from the stereo. It all felt so contrived; the total Greek experience in one meal. Is this place for tourists or what, Wells thought.

He ordered a glass of wine and a bowl of beetroot salad with boiled greens and mashed potatoes—the suggestion on the chalkboard outside. As he sat, waiting for the food, he noticed a detailed map of the island on the placemat and a quote, at the bottom, in large letters: “‘Hydra, you can’t live anywhere else in the world, including Hydra.’ (Kenneth Koch)” What did that mean? Certainly an odd choice to try to sell the place to tourists. Then again, perhaps that was the point: to get them on, but also off the island.

When the food arrived, Wells picked up the other placemat and studied it for some of the landmarks he had read and heard about: Moni Zourvas, Limnioniza Bay, the Byzantine Museum, Hotel Miranda. Cohen’s house, of course, was not there.

“Do you know a guy named Pete?” Wells asked when the waiter came back to clear the table.

“Pete? Yes,” the waiter said, pointing outside without looking.

“Who is he?”

“Everybody know him. An American. A Vietnam veteran. Before, he own a very popular bar on the island. Everybody know pete.”

“Know where to find him?”

The waiter pointed outside again.

Wells turned to look. “Outside?”

The waiter turned, too, and looked surprised to only see tourists crowding the walkway. “He’s always—there he is.”

A short man appeared, barely five feet tall, and with a long white beard. He wore sunglasses and a flat green army cap, a tight T-shirt and shorts. “*Efharisto*,” Wells said, putting money on the table. “I’ll try to catch him while he’s there.”

The man seemed to decrease in height but grow in size as Wells walked toward him. A short Santa Claus, he thought. Pretty close. The man was helping a sailor moor his boat. His arms had probably once looked like a bodybuilder’s, but they now filled the sleeves of his *Got Greece?* shirt with soft flesh. He wore hiking boots and wool socks—unusual in Greece.

Wells waited until the sailor shook hands with the man and left. “Pete?” Wells said.

The man turned and smiled. “That’s me.”

“Wells Oliver.” He put out his hand. “I’m from Kythera. From Canada, but I live in Kythera.”

Pete nodded. “Good.”

“A friend of mine, Yiannis, said that I should talk to you. I am looking for a house on the island.”

“To rent or buy?”

“No,” Wells said, embarrassed. “To see.”

Pete nodded, as if to signal that this happened all the time and that curiosity wasn’t anything to be ashamed of. “I can give you the whole tour: Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones, the painters, Ginsberg, Cohen, Corso.”

“Actually, Cohen’s house is the one I’m really looking for.”

“No problem,” Pete said. “When?”

“Are you free now?”

“All booked today. Could do tomorrow at eight.”

Wells hesitated. He didn’t think he could wait. “Couldn’t you just tell me where it is?”

“I could,” the man said, “but I promise it wouldn’t be as good.” He winked. “I’d wait if I were you. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’ll meet you right here tomorrow, then,” Wells said. He thought about asking the man if he had seen Cohen on the island recently, but he couldn’t bring himself to. A bit too much. He’d find out soon enough anyway.

Wells spent the rest of the day walking up and down the twisting streets of Hydra Town. Nothing better than finding yourself lost in an unknown town on a nice day, wandering around aimlessly.

Hydra certainly had its charms: the tiers of red-roofed houses with weathered stone doorsteps all angled down toward the port, the small artisans’ shops in the warrens behind the harbor front. But the island was also filled with tourists—Athenians, Germans, Danes—and much of its activities seemed geared toward them. Wells wondered what the island could’ve looked like in 1960 when Cohen had arrived on a steamer from Athens. With no electricity, plumbing or phones, it must’ve felt like a different world altogether, an unspoiled paradise, especially when coming from Montreal via London. The absence of cars, then, had probably been the result of various coincidences, a combination of factors: the roughness of the terrain, the impracticability and steepness of the roads, the sheer unavailability of gas. But now it felt as if

the inhabitants clung to this as a reputation, a characteristic that defined them and their island, setting them apart from the others. Everybody knew Hydra as the place with no cars. Where do you go from there?

In the evening, Wells bought bread and cheese in a small supermarket and hiked up to the fort overlooking the mainland, at the entrance of the bay. He sat on the concrete base of one of the canons. Mount Ere stood, a dark and reassuring presence in the background. He thought about Malin. How long would she stay mad at him? He wondered how she would react if she ever found out about Anna. Certainly with more grace and calm than he would be capable of, given the circumstances. She really could be stubborn, though.

For the first time since coming back from Montreal, Wells thought about confessing to her. It would hurt Malin, but how could he truly put it behind him—behind them—otherwise? The guilt was already gnawing at him. He had never explicitly promised Malin anything, but this did not absolve him. Such a male way to think about it, Wells realized suddenly. No matter what she expected, he couldn't give less than he wanted. What's worse, Wells wondered, living with the guilt, or giving her a license to fuck up the same way I did?

The harbor stirred with life after dark had fallen, and it reminded Wells of Kapsali. Couples dressed up in their best outfits strolled along, no doubt heading to one of the fancy waterside restaurants, and clusters of people started to line up in disorderly fashion for the bars. In that light, the island looked almost like any other European city. It could've been Mykonos or Barcelona. Just a place to party. Wells glanced around, hoping to perhaps catch a glimpse of Cohen going into a store for fruit or a jar of olives. He probably has someone who does that for him, he decided.

Further away from the bustle of the district, down the walkway, diving platforms hung above the water, white and pure against the night. Even with no streetlights, the sea gave off an eerie, greenish glow. Wells walked in that direction, guided by the echoing voices of a few swimmers. The sea grew brighter as he approached.

He stood on one of the platforms, unable to make out the faces of the six or seven bodies moving below.

“*Allez, plonge!*” a woman’s voice said, urging him on. “*Elle est bonne.*”

“*Moi?*” Wells asked.

She laughed. “*Qui d’autre? Vas-y, plonge!*”

The voice reminded him of his mother’s. He wanted to hear her speak. “*Je suis tout habillé.*” He had no other clothes.

“*Mais on s’en fout! Who cares? T’es bouché ou quoi?*”

Wells decided that the voice came from the second featureless face on the left. “A little,” he said. “*Un peu.*”

“*Allez,*” she said. “*C’est le temps alors.*”

Wells dropped his pack on the cobblestone walkway, ran onto the board and dove in. He hardly felt anything entering the water, as if the sea had set its temperature on his body’s. He surfaced a moment later, arms and hands luminous with *phosphoris*.

“*Tu vois,*” the same voice said. “We are all made of gold.”

## EIGHTEEN

In the morning, the port looked like the Sunday market in Potamos. Men ran up and down large wooden planks bridging the gap between the boats and the mainland, carrying crates of fruits and vegetables, large sacks of flour and boxes of cigarettes. Wells walked stiffly to the agreed meeting place in front of the *taverna*.

After swimming, the night before, the idea of sleeping outside had delighted him. The French woman and her friends—a group of students from Avignon backpacking through Greece—had recommended hiking up the hill that rose immediately behind the diving platforms and setting camp in the small cemetery there. They had spent a week on the island themselves and had enjoyed many nights of free and undisturbed sleep after stumbling on the quiet spot by chance. The woman told Wells nobody minded as long as you picked up after yourself. That sounded like a wonderful idea and, Wells suspected, his only option, since it looked like Malin had been right about needing reservations for the hotels.

The view from the top of the hill was fetching. The harbor looked like a crescent moon, a string of blinking Christmas lights. Wells lay on the ground, using his pack as a pillow. His clothes were wet, and he shivered until he fell asleep. What a stupid idea not to have brought a change of clothes. He spent the night sleeping in small shifts, trying to ignore the miserable brays of donkeys and the noisy goings-on of the feral cats playing around him. When he did sleep, he dreamt strange, kaleidoscopic dreams of his father as a child.

One doesn't realize, Wells thought when the sun rose, how much we take for granted in this life. At three in the morning, he would have given a lot of money for a hotel room or at least a pair of dry pants.

There was a line of people waiting to talk to Pete, on the boardwalk, when Wells got there. He stood aside to observe this strange, evidently daily ritual. Pete wore a Mickey Hart tie-dyed T-shirt from which his belly protruded slightly, an overweight octopus with eight busy tentacles. He seemed to listen attentively and with a great deal of patience to the questions and requests thrown his way, all the while helping a boat dock by signaling with one hand and catching a rope or waving to a passer-by with the other. A rather peculiar, though no less charming island tradition, Wells thought.

A pale and very formal couple appeared at the head of the queue. The tall, mustached man looked like John Cleese. He told Pete that he and his wife hadn't been able to find a suitable hotel that still had rooms available and asked Pete if he knew of one. "*Orloff's* still had one twenty minutes ago," Pete said. "But hurry up." How did he know that? Pete pointed them in the right direction and shook hands with the man, who slipped him a few Euros. *That's* why he does this, Wells thought.

A few minutes after eight the line had vanished. Pete turned to Wells, acknowledging his presence for the first time. "Sorry about the delay. I can't turn away the last few people when they've been waiting so long."

"No problem," Wells said.

"How was the swim with the Frenchies last night?" he asked.

Wells laughed. The man really did know everything. "It was a lot of fun, actually."

"Good. Ready, then?"

They passed through the center of the temporary marketplace that the harbor front had been turned into for the morning. Islanders and restaurant owners inspected fish and haggled over the price of a case of tomatoes; tourists hired donkeys for the day.

Pete walked briskly, like someone who had done this countless numbers of times before. Nothing in his tone of voice or demeanor revealed condescension or impatience. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy doing this, and despite what Wells had feared, being led by a guide didn't feel all that embarrassing. Pete probably figured everyone had their own reasons for wanting to retrace the steps of their favorite stars.

He stopped in front of a small bakery, at the bottom of a set of stairs.

"I'm fine," Wells said.

Pete laughed. "You're not. Get us a couple of almond cakes and some coffee, OK?"

"Seriously, though, I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me."

"Kid," Pete said, "you look like hell this morning. Probably had to sleep outside too, right? Shoulda come to me last night."

"Sure makes you appreciate your bed."

Pete nodded. "But I didn't only bring you here for breakfast," he said. "This used to be *Katsika's*, a grocery shop with a bar at the back. It's where Leonard met everyone for the first time. The expats gathered here to read poetry, play cards and drink. He also gave his first concert here. The Johnstons gave him a bed for his house." Pete told Wells that the bakery had replaced the store years ago, but that it had barely changed inside. "Actually," he said, looking at the stray cats that wandered in and out, "I think these guys were probably here then too."

"How long have you lived in Hydra?" Wells asked, an hour later. He was following Pete to their next stop on the tour.

"Couldn't say. Thirty, thirty-five."

"And you like it?"



“Don’t you?” He played with his beard. “Look at this place; it’s small, friendly, and beautiful. Wouldn’t live anywhere else. Matter of fact, have hardly left since I got here.”

“Where you from?”

“Muscle Shoals, Alabama.”

“Feel at home here?” Wells asked.

“Sure. As much as it’s possible to. You know how it is—they tolerate us. Mostly, I think, because we entertain them. But it’s their land. We’re just transients to them, unless your grandparents knew theirs.”

Across town, by the ferry and water taxi quays, Pete led Wells up a long, climbing street of internet cafés and cocktail bars. The man’s gait was solid, steady, and the grommets of his boots clinked with a metallic ring every time he put a foot down.

“This,” Pete said when they reached a plateau at the top of the hill where a chic hotel stood, “is the *Bratsera*.”

Two of the buildings in the complex were white, and one made of stone with a red terracotta roof. “It’s incredible,” Wells said. “But what does it have to do with—”

“The restaurant, over there, on the other side: that used to be a bar called Bill’s. Leonard had drinks there often, too.”

They went around the main building of the hotel and entered a private, enclosed courtyard with a small swimming pool. Two rows of colonnades topped with trellis, under which small tables awaited the lunch patrons, surrounded the pool. Next to it, a wonderful garden of cypress, oleander and jacaranda.

“Who could tell now,” Wells said. He couldn’t hide his disappointment. Sure, the hotel looked beautiful—nice enough, in fact, that he decided he would come back with Malin to spend

a night or two there—but there was nothing mythical about it. It had been a sponge factory before, Pete said, and the architects did a brilliant job of giving the place a second life. It also had the only swimming pool on the island. But Wells still couldn't see or feel Cohen. The man had just drunk beer there thirty years before. There wasn't even a hint of the old bar left. It was like standing in the middle of Samos and telling yourself that you were walking in Pythagoras' footsteps.

Wells began to have serious doubts about both the tour and his guide when they went down to the boardwalk again, all the way back to where they had started from. Pete pointed out a few landmarks along the way, mostly restaurants where he claimed Cohen used to eat. He's trying to stretch this out so he can charge more, Wells thought. Was he even going to take him to the house?

They started up the stairs next to the bakery. "How long have you been in Kythera for?" Pete asked.

"Five or six months."

He looked back at him. "You there with a girl?"

"Yeah. She studied business in Sweden. Just finished school."

"And you do what?" Pete asked.

"Mathematician. But I'm thinking about tutoring kids or teaching, something like that."

"Never been to Kythera myself," Pete said. "Heard it was real nice."

"Quiet, too, which I like."

Wells caught up to him at the top of the stairs. They trudged up a street which had a sign that said *Lignou*. The name sounded familiar to Wells.

Pete offered a cigarette and shrugged when Wells declined. He lit it with an old lighter shaped like a woman's leather boot. "What does Kythera mean?"

"To me?"

"Not to you, just... I remember somebody telling me about its origin or something."

"They say it's where Aphrodite was born," Wells said.

"Really? It's something else, though. Can't think of it now."

There were many stairs. Always more stairs, it seemed. Then the road turned into a very narrow alley bordered on one side by a tall wall of piled rocks. Pete stopped again once they had passed the wall.

"What are we looking at here?" Wells asked.

Pete made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "This is it."

"What?"

"This is Leonard's house."

The building was a three-story whitewashed affair with windows painted a grayish-blue, set deep in the walls. A nice house, but nothing about it could have hinted at the greatness of its owner.

"He bought it for 1500 dollars in 1960 with money that he inherited from his grandmother," Pete explained. "The house was in bad shape when he purchased it, but he spent time and energy revamping it."

So that was it. Wells touched one of the narrow twin front doors with his hand. It had a strange brass knocker in its middle—a hand bent down at the wrist, holding a fake door knob. With luck, Cohen would be standing right behind those doors, though Wells didn't count on it. It was, after all, a nice day.

“Is he there, you think?” Wells asked.

“No,” Pete said.

So why did I come with him? Wells wondered. What had he seen that he couldn’t have figured out or found on his own?

Pete smoothed his long beard. “You want to see more?”

Of course Wells wanted to see more. ““Sure,” he said.

“Wait here a second,” Pete said, and went knocking on a door, a few houses up from where Wells stood. An old woman answered; they exchanged greetings and a friendly kiss on the cheek.

Pete came back, dangling a key in front of him. “Told you I’d make it worth your while.”

“But won’t Leonard—Cohen mind?” Wells asked.

“I don’t usually do this, so you know. Just don’t touch anything, and it’ll be fine.” Pete pushed one of the heavy, white wooden doors, and they entered. “Lenny won’t mind.”

Inside, the house was cool and quiet. Wells couldn’t believe what was happening. He had expected to see the house, the whole reason he’d traveled all this way. Maybe he’d planned on knocking to try to talk to Cohen, but not to actually go in. Pete hadn’t disappointed after all.

Wells looked around with quiet reverence. Everything about the house felt solid: its thick stone walls and ceramic floors, the wooden furnishings; and yet Wells didn’t want to touch anything. Not only because Pete had warned him not to (more as a matter of principle, Wells suspected, than because Pete really thought he would), but because it just seemed wrong somehow, like trying to steal something from him. This was the house Cohen had lived in permanently for a decade. Wells didn’t want to disturb the memories sleeping there.

“Everything’s white,” Wells said as they entered the living room.

“Look at that fireplace,” Pete said. “Nice, huh?”

A typical Greek fireplace—low and wide with a chimney that looked like an Erlenmeyer—but perhaps twice the normal size. Its gaping mouth looked huge and hungry for wood. On the inglenook, close to it, an antique children’s rocking horse waited patiently. Wells could imagine Cohen and Marianne, with the kids, sitting in the room, having tea or maybe talking about the house itself, about what needed to be done, how to improve it. For the first time of the day, Wells could actually feel Cohen’s presence. He wondered what he would do, how he would react if the poet suddenly appeared at the door. He’d certainly feel ridiculous, standing there, staring at his things.

“You know Cohen?” Wells asked. “I mean, personally.”

“Sure,” Pete said. “Known him a long time.”

“Who are the people you got that key from?”

“Friends of his. This house was in their family before. They’ve always kept a key.” He motioned with his hand. “Come see the kitchen.”

There, perhaps even more than in the previous room, Cohen seemed to be with them. One of the wooden chairs at the table, next to the open window, was pushed back and a cup just sat there, as if somebody had had coffee that same morning. White everywhere in the kitchen too, the cupboards, the stove, the tables and chairs. Contrasting this, the shelves were lined with dozens of colored objects: blue ceramic dishes, wooden carafes, pottery, empty glass bottles of every shape and size, some green, some brown, some transparent.

“It’s like he’s here with us,” Pete said, nodding toward the jars of rice and pasta next to the stove.

Wells felt butterflies in his stomach. “Think he might walk in on us here?”

“Leonard?” Pete said. “Doubt it. That would even surprise me. He hasn’t been here in a while.”

Wells tried not to look crestfallen. “Really? When’s the last time you saw him?”

“Fifteen years. Maybe more.”

Wells wondered if he should mention having seen Cohen at *Zebra’s* some weeks back. “Does he have another house here?”

“Not that I know of,” Pete said. “He hasn’t been back in Greece for at least ten.”

How could this be? “I think I might have seen him in Montreal about a month ago.”

“You shoulda said hello. He’s the nicest man.”

At the back of the house, a table and four chairs covered with white muslin stood in the center of a large, rectangular terrace boxed in by whitewashed half-walls. Wells remembered an article he’d read in which Cohen had described this as the best spot on the island.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Pete said. “Then we’ll need to get going. I’ve got someone waiting for me at noon down in the port. Two kids from San Francisco. They want the Rolling Stones tour.”

Cohen’s bedroom was small, simple and neat, the double bed carefully made and protected by a gossamer veil hung from the ceiling. A lot must have happened there over the years. The wooden floor creaked when Pete walked to the window at the back of the room and closed the shutters. Their backsides revealed beautiful, hand painted scenes of the island that lit up the room. “Aren’t these something?” he said proudly.

“One more room,” Pete said, leading Wells across the hallway.

“Oh my God,” Wells exclaimed as he stood in the doorway. The narrow, corridor-like room had a work table on one side, against the wall, and a small cot with pillows on the other. “This is the table,” he said. There, too, the back window was open, flanked by a bronze crucifix and an old classical guitar.

“What do you mean?” Pete asked.

“You know; from the back cover of *Songs from a Room*. They were songs from *this* room.”

“I never really listened to the music, myself,” Pete said. “I wouldn’t know. I just like the guy.”

Wells couldn’t believe it. This was of historical significance, like finding Newton’s apple. Marianne had sat at that table, turning toward Cohen who had stood exactly where Wells now did and posed shyly for the camera, pretending to type on his battered, old *Olivetti*.

Pete walked to the back of the room again. “I know this thing here,” he said, pointing outside at an electrical line, “is what made him write ‘Bird on a Wire’ when they finally brought electricity to the island. This he told me himself.”

“Thank you, Pete,” Wells said. “I’m glad I took the tour. You were right; it really was worth it. I was hoping to see Cohen, but this is good. I think I got everything I needed.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “How much do I owe you?”

“What do you mean?”

“For the tour. How much is it?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pete said. “I owed Yiannis anyway. Settle it with him if you need to.”

Wells nodded. So he had been wrong about him in every possible way. “I will then. As soon as I get back to Kythera.”

“Hey, you know what I was telling you about Kythera, earlier?” Pete said. “I remember now.”

“What?”

“The Greeks say it’s where the first sailor in the world was from, before it became an island. The man was in love with a woman and when an earthquake separated Kythera from the mainland, he used it as a raft to go find her.”

Wells smiled. “Really? I never heard that before.”

“And the other thing,” Pete continued, “but this you’ve probably read in a guidebook or something: A trip to Kythera was considered an impossible task by the pilgrims. It was an island they set out for but never reached, a place of eternal destination, of distant, perfect beauty and dream. As long as it stayed far away, it preserved its spark. Something like that.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” Pete said.

“What happened with Marianne?”

“Nobody knows for sure. All kinds of rumors. I never asked Lenny directly.” Pete paused. “She was a beauty. Nice, simple, too. A real good girl.”

“What do *you* think happened?” Wells asked.

Pete looked around as if to make sure nobody else was listening. He moved closer to Wells. “I think she left with his best friend.”



## **PART FOUR**

### **MALIN**

## NINETEEN

*Chicago* is what Malin's mother had said, although *Western Illinois* would not only have been a more appropriate but also a more honest description of the move.

As the day of departure had approached, the sorrow of separating from her father, her friends and her house had slowly subsided, replaced by the sheer excitement and promise of the move. Malin knew she would always be welcomed back if she needed to return. Plus, she figured at thirteen, there had to be more to the world than the Lilliputian piece of continent that ran between Stockholm and Gotland.

Malin waved goodbye to her father, promising she would call as soon as she landed, and boarded the large SAS plane bound for America.

Her mother had left a few weeks before to find a place to live and a school for Malin to attend. She phoned every day, always around the same time, to report on the state of affairs. At first, calling from Aunt Nina's house in Chicago, her calls had been brief and to the point, as if she feared Malin would ask questions that could lead her to change her mind and decide to stay with her father. Malin recognized sadness and anxiety in her mother's voice, and this made her nervous too. Her mother had always been so steadfast, so confident. But progressively, the calls lengthened and the enthusiasm grew. The indistinct, annoying chatter of Nina's television set, in the background, gave way to the high-pitched zooming of trucks when her mother began calling from motel payphones, and finally, to the reassuring quiet of a new house.

Malin always pretended to be too absorbed in whatever she was doing at the time to hear the phone ring. "It's your mother," her father would call from across the house. "My hands are wet," or "I'm in the bathroom," Malin would say so that he'd answer, hoping that this daily

exchange of courtesies would help slowly mend their relationship. She loved her parents but hated her father for having slept with someone else, and her mother for having let him, and then having left. What else would be pulled from under her feet at a moment's notice?

And who could say that her father wouldn't meet another woman? Somebody younger, prettier. Malin saw how the men looked at the girls, most barely out of their teens, that strolled down Drottningg Street when her father took her shopping in Normalmm. "Dad," she'd always say, trying to catch his attention by pretending that she wanted to go into a store to check out a shirt or a pair of shoes or to get something to eat. Malin noticed married men, across the street, nearly breaking their necks trying to catch a glimpse while holding their wives' hands. She promised herself that she would never let someone do that to her.

Flying was exciting. Arlanda airport seemed gigantic when walking inside, but it grew smaller and smaller when the plane began climbing in altitude and finally became just another feature of the landscape, a small box with dozens of black lines radiating from it. The waving grass fields, lakes and forests of Småland looked like the uneven patches of a quilt. Then, suddenly, another city. Probably Copenhagen. And after that, nothing. Just blue. The ocean stretching for hours below. For the first time she could remember, Malin actually felt scared. She did not know anyone on the plane, and the water looked so cold, so lonely. She wondered how deep the ocean could be. They had never learned about that in school. If the plane came hurtling down into the Atlantic, how long would they all drop before reaching bottom? How cold, how dark would it be there? She hated her parents for having let her fly alone.

Malin searched the front pocket of her knapsack and pulled out her father's *Philippe Patek*. She had taken it from his bedroom just before leaving. He probably wouldn't mind, she thought, since he always said that whatever he owned was also hers. She put it on, thinking of

how she would explain this to her mother. Probably by saying it had been a gift, a souvenir. She set the watch back seven hours and leaned over to look outside. Still nothing but blue.

Malin's mother was ecstatic when she picked her up at the airport in Chicago. Malin could only remember her mother's stoicism at home before, how she had always taken care of everything but rarely smiled or seemed to derive pleasure out of anything. "*Gumman!*" her mother yelled, running in the airport lobby like a deranged woman. How embarrassing. But Malin realized she had missed her mother. She had flown to a large city in a foreign country, but feeling the heat of her mother's cheek against hers, she understood that everything would be fine after all.

They stacked the suitcases full of clothes in the tight, impractical trunk of her mother's new car—a flashy turquoise mini-jeep with a removable white vinyl top. "Are you having a mid-life crisis?" Malin asked her mother when she saw the jeep. She had read an article, on the plane, about what happened to people in their forties and fifties.

Malin couldn't wait to see her new house, the Sears Tower, the Art Institute. Everything about Chicago seemed big, new and interesting. She had been reading about it in newspaper clippings and photocopied articles that Jonas, the Danish boy she had met during the summer, had been sending her, along with long syrupy letters in which he said that he loved her and couldn't stop thinking about her, that he would finish high school and come live with her in America where he would train to become an NHL player. He wrote that he had never seen blonde hair as perfect as hers, blue eyes as deep. He would make a lot of money and buy a huge house and two new cars because in America, Jonas said, there were hardly any taxes. Malin found the letters hopelessly affected, and she stopped reading them after the first few. She just threw them away and saved the articles to glue in her scrapbook.

Malin had crossed the ocean for a fresh start. She was a young, beautiful and smart girl in a city buzzing with life.

Her disappointment felt bottomless when her mother zipped through the city, past all the landmarks Malin had been waiting to finally see, and onto a grey and flat four-lane highway through indistinct suburbs.

“Where are you going?” Malin asked.

“What do you mean, Love?”

Malin turned in her seat and looked in the back window, a vaguely transparent sheet of plastic. “*That’s* Chicago.”

“But Aunt Nina doesn’t live right in the city,” her mother said.

“How far?”

“About two and a half hours. A beautiful small town, right on the Mississippi.”

Malin stared at her mother, confused and angry.

“I found a job there,” her mother said. “In a dental clinic. And wait until you see the perfect little apartment I found. With your own room, too.”

Fourteen years later. Malin had hardly spoken to her mother since she had turned eighteen and had decided to leave the US to start business school in Göteborg. But after Malin had completed her studies, they had started calling each other occasionally, and now there she was, flying to Chicago once more to go visit her in the city the city, where her mother had just moved.

Everything in Malin’s life, for once, seemed in its right place. She had managed to graduate from university without totally losing her mind. She had asked Petr, her boyfriend of

three years and a brilliant architect, to move in with her and things were, against all expectations—or maybe just her own—actually working out.

But sitting next to Wells at the airport and on the plane affected time in a way she had never experienced before. The flight went by in a heartbeat, still nothing was lost on her; every moment seemed to unfold in slow motion. Malin could see, feel and hear every minute detail. She managed to gather the essentials quickly—Canadian, single, scientist, early thirties—then talked with him. Just talked.

For the first time in my life, Malin thought after saying goodbye to Wells and trading phone numbers at the airport, I felt like saying everything. Everything about her, her life, about what she thought, how she felt. She had explained to Wells how difficult it had been to let Petr in but that it had done her good. “Loyalty is like coriander,” Wells had said. “Takes some getting used to.”

She had talked about how glad she was that her father had met Anika, someone she didn’t actually loathe for a change. They had discussed politics, school, traveling and music with equal intensity and interest. Wells listened and always had something to say, an opinion often diametrically opposed to hers, but instead of making her retreat and solidify her position, it made her reconsider it.

Malin had always seen things as twofold: her and the rest of the world. Between her needs and the others’, between what she said and what she really thought, she often struggled to find a middle ground. But talking to Wells for those seven hours, it seemed that the two rival camps could somehow merge into a single one.



The week unfolded quietly and Malin did the things a daughter does when visiting family in a distant country: movies, restaurants, shopping, and a lot of late-night chats over coffee. She thought about Wells a few time but never actually considered calling him, even if only for Petr's sake. But Wells called two days before Malin had to leave, asking if she thought her mother would mind losing her daughter for a couple of hours.

Malin felt no nervousness when she walked out of her mother's apartment building to meet Wells downstairs. She had taken over an hour just to get ready, to decide what to wear, not knowing what they would do or where they would they go. But it didn't matter. Somehow, it felt almost scripted, like a *déjà vu*. Malin didn't feel like there were dozens of options or possibilities. She didn't question anything; she just knew what she had to do.

Wells held the door for her when she sat down in the car. "Looks like you survived the week after all," he said.

The inside of the Subaru smelled like his cologne. Malin had immediately noticed it on the plane and had decided right then that it had to be the best thing she had ever smelled. "So what are we doing?" she asked. "You're the one who called."

Wells laughed. "Depends how much time you have. We can drive around. Maybe go have a beer at Schuba's?"

"How much time do *you* have?" Malin asked.

"As long as you're free," he said.

"You don't mind driving?"

Wells shook his head.

"Then get on 80 west, right there."

Malin felt the unexplained urge to show him the place where she had grown up. Short of flying to Stockholm, it was the closest she could physically get to her past with him. Wells didn't ask questions, and she liked that. He just drove. Malin knew every single CD in his changer: Van Morrison, Tom Waits, Harry Nilsson. The boy was obviously a dreamer, but there was also something stable, very solid about him. She liked that too.

They drove through cornfields all the way to the state's confines. Malin guided him through the streets of Rock Island; darkened residential neighborhoods echoed with the barking of dogs, dilapidated mansions with cars rusting on the front lawns.

"I lived here for five years," she said when they parked the Subaru in front of a small brick apartment building. It looked the same as any other on that street, a wide one-way lined with huge oak trees that made it seem like you were driving through a tunnel.

What now, Malin thought. She hadn't planned anything else. They had driven over two hours to come look at a building. She didn't really have any stories about the place or any favorite spots to show. Mostly, the years she had spent there with her mother had blurred into vague, random memories of adolescence. "Want to go for a drink?" she asked.

They went looking for a pub, somewhere quiet where they would be able to sit and talk. "I was too young to go out when I lived here," Malin said. "I don't know the good spots."

All they could find was a small, smoky neighborhood tavern where they sat at the bar and tried to maintain a normal conversation over a jukebox blaring Eighties' hits and the loud clamor of the darts league players. Malin realized she hadn't thought of Petr since Wells had called.

They talked about Europe. Wells told her he had been in London for a Mathematical Society conference, but that it was the only place he'd visited there so far. "When you live in Europe," Malin said to him, "you get around." She had already been to Spain, Turkey, Italy,



Prague, all over Scandinavia, and had spent one summer in Corfu. Most trips she had taken with friends, some with Petr. “You have to see Prague,” she said to him. “It’s the most beautiful city.”

When she talked, Malin had to lean in close to Wells because her voice could not break through the racket of the tavern. Every time she did, she felt like kissing his neck. If he had asked her to follow him to Tahiti that night, Malin probably would have.

“You want to get out of here?” Wells asked when they finished their drinks.

Outside, the night had turned a little cooler. Or perhaps it was just the contrast with the heat of their bodies.

“What’s over there?” Wells asked, pointing at the tall, gunmetal grey arches of the Centennial Bridge rising above the houses’ rooftops.

“Iowa,” Malin said.

“Never come this far west. I always stay in the city.”

She motioned for Wells to follow her. “Let’s go, then.”

They crossed the Mississippi in the night, Wells obviously amazed at the number of small riverside casinos and the sheer poetry of the act, the place—such a mythical river. As they got closer to the other side, Malin noticed that the streets were unusually empty and quiet. Almost no cars, just parked backhoes, bulldozers and dump trucks.

The Mississippi had flooded downtown Davenport. The shores had been sandbagged in a desperate effort to limit the damages. But many of the streets were closed, the asphalt cracked and buckled into odd, twisted shapes that reminded her of hard toffee. Strange to think of a disaster happening in a place where you once lived.

Wells parked the car in a construction zone, and they decided to go walk down by the river to take a closer look. By the extent of the reconstruction that had already been undertaken, it seemed that the flooding had to have happened weeks before. Yet it still felt as if they were walking in a war zone.

But soon, Malin forgot about the river and the flood. She forgot about the apartment in Rock Island. She could have been anywhere, walking with him. They talked as they had on the plane earlier that week. Wells told her about his research project, about his love for Mathematics. He described his family, crazy, just like hers. Malin wanted more. She wanted to know everything, wanted nothing to be left unspoken between her and this stranger.

“Please,” she said when he stepped over a manhole cover. “Don’t do that.”

“What?” Wells asked, looking puzzled.

“Don’t step over those.”

Wells frowned. “Why not?”

“I can’t stand it,” Malin said. “You never know, you know?”

They did not touch, kiss, or even explicitly agree that they would ever talk again after that night. And yet, as soon as her plane landed in Göteborg, two days later, Malin drove home in haste, walked into the apartment and woke up Petr who had been sound asleep. “Wake up,” she said. “I can’t do this. Please go sleep at Karl’s for tonight. I’ll call you in the morning. Tomorrow you can come back and get your stuff.”

## TWENTY

“Four down: nine-letter word; witty, humorous.” Malin looked up from the book. “Ends with S.”

Wells tapped the kitchen table with his index, thinking. “Facetious.”

“How did you get so good at this?”

“I’m just really, really smart,” Wells said in a mocking tone.

He had just returned from Hydra, and the trip seemed to have done him good. He didn’t talk about Cohen as much though he still asked a lot of questions. Malin wanted to wait for the right occasion to talk to him. So much to say still about wanting a career, wanting to move back, everything. But some moments are meant not to be spoiled, and she knew this. There were few things in life that she liked better than to sit with him at the table after breakfast, sipping tea and looking at travel magazine pictures, playing chess or doing crosswords.

“Alright, Einstein; eighteen across, beginning with that S: blue cheese.” She started writing. “Stilton. My grandfather loves Stilton.”

“So, will I ever meet your parents?” Wells asked.

Malin had insisted that he didn’t at first because her father was mad that she had acted the way she had with Petr, all for a ridiculous fling—not even a fling!—with a total stranger she would probably never see again. Her father liked Petr a lot. But she had made her father understand that she knew what she was doing and that Wells was special, someone who would take care of her, be there for her. She really had no reason not to introduce him anymore, but she had been waiting for Wells to ask. “Why?”

“Why? Because my parents *love* you and I haven’t even seen yours once. I’ve only talked to your father on the phone.”

“They’re crazy,” she said.

Wells took the crossword book from her. “So are you, and I’m still here.”

“OK. If you really want to. Next time. I promise.”

The front door of the house slammed open. Malin and Wells both stood up quickly. Gabriella stomped into the kitchen, hysterical.

“*Hijo de puta*,” she said. “Fucking bastard.”

Malin grabbed her arm. “What is it? What?”

Gabriella just stood there, trying to contain her anger, looking as if she were about to explode.

“Gab,” Malin said. “Tell me. What?”

“I can leave, if you—” Wells said, but neither Gabriella nor Malin reacted.

“Aidan’s been screwing around.”

Silence fell upon the room for a brief, charged moment. Malin considered the situation.

“What? Can’t be,” Wells said. “He’d never do that to you.”

Gabriella pointed a finger at Wells accusingly. “*Basta*. Are you part of this too? Been sleeping with stupid nineteen-year-olds?”

Wells raised his voice. “Hey. You’re in *our* house. Don’t go all *loca* on me. We were just sitting here having breakfast.” Softer, he said, “Come on, sit down.”

“What happened?” Malin asked. “Why would you even think that?”

Gabriella sat and sighed loudly. “Ah!” she grunted, pushing the chair back to stand up again. “It drives me crazy just thinking about it. I pay for everything, you know. *Everything*.”

Malin tried to sound calm, reassuring. “Are you sure about this, though? Doesn’t sound like him at all.” She turned to Wells. “You want to get her some water, please.”

Wells poured a glass and handed it to Gabriella. “I’m with him a lot, you know. And I don’t know anything about this, I promise.” He seemed to think for a second. “What did you hear?”

Gabriella shook her head as if she didn’t trust Wells. “I *heard* he fucked a girl.”

Malin had no idea what Gabriella knew—or thought she knew—but she didn’t want to seem too eager to find out either. What easier way to awaken suspicion. First thing to do was to try to get out of the house and away from Wells. “Want to go for a walk or something so we can talk?” Gabriella ignored this.

“I can talk to Aidan if you want me to,” Wells offered. “I’ll try to make him spit it out, if there’s anything. But I’m not even sure—”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Malin said, cutting him off. She felt a knot in her stomach.

“No,” Gabriella agreed. “Don’t.” She walked across the kitchen then said, “I am not sure why I came here. He’s probably at the bar, still drunk. He never came home last night. I should—” She paused, then turned to go.

Malin stopped her. “Wait.”

“What?”

“I have something for you.”

“Later,” Gabriella said. “Unless it’s him hiding here somewhere.”

Malin ran to the bedroom and took the wooden ring from the cigar box. “Maybe it’s not the best time, but... look what I found,” she said, handing Gabriella the ring. “You must’ve taken it off and it slid under the couch.”

Gabriella took the ring and stared at Malin. “Who gave this to you?”

“Nobody *gave* this to me,” Malin said. “Come on.”

“Thanks,” Gabriella said nonchalantly, slipping the ring into her pocket. “I’ll talk to you later. And if you see him, or if he *is* hiding,” she added, raising her voice, “tell him I need to have a little word.”

Wells followed Gabriella to the door then stood in front of the living room window. “Think she’s right?”

“If he did it, you mean?”

“I can’t think he would. She’s been taking care of him.”

“Yeah,” Malin said, “but she’s also been spending so much time with Aley.”

“I noticed that,” he said. “It would bother me for sure.”

Malin grabbed an orange on the counter and started peeling it. “And he keeps complaining how they never have sex.”

“Not to me, he doesn’t,” Wells said. “Has he ever come on to you?”

“Now *you’re* talking crazy, Love.”

After lunch, Malin lay on the living room couch, her head on Wells’ knees. He was reading a surfing magazine. He had been talking about wanting to take it up. Malin had thought about Gabriella all morning, trying to see things from her perspective, to understand how she could

feel. Something Wells did, Malin guessed, but which she rarely took the time to. Easier to let your instincts guide you.

She had almost told Gabriella that she had no right to be mad, especially after having kissed Aley, and whatever else she had done. But then maybe there were things Malin didn't know. She certainly couldn't see Aidan just sleeping with a random girl he'd met at the bar.

Malin wondered what Gabriella had heard or found out that had pushed her into her rampage. It couldn't be just be that someone had said something about Malin and Aidan showing up at the restaurant together. Gabriella wouldn't find that odd or objectionable.

"Don't ever do that to me," Malin said to Wells.

"What? Cheat on you?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Or if you do, don't tell me. I'd rather you had to live with the guilt."

Wells shrugged. "Duly noted."

"You think everybody gets to that point?"

"What point?" he asked.

"You know. Not touching, forgetting to have sex."

Wells put down his magazine. "Hope not. Can't see how I would, with you. You worried?"

"Not really. Just wondering."

"Thinking about sleeping with somebody else?"

Malin got up and took him by the hand. "Come to bed," she said. "Now."



Later that evening, Wells told Malin that he was going out with two guys from Toronto he'd met at the beach. She decided to stay in, not wanting to intrude on a boys' night out, and feeling anxious for reasons she couldn't fully comprehend. She had to talk to Aidan but did not want to show up at their house and risk coming across as overly concerned, out of character.

Malin headed down to the plaza, hoping to stumble upon Gabriella by accident. What else could she do?

A quiet night for the restaurants, a few tourists eating dinner here and there, *Niko's* the most crowded, as usual. No sign of Gabriella. Yiannis, Spiros and the *Café Pierrot* crew sat at the terrace of a smaller *taverna*, drinking on their night off. "Hey sexy," Yiannis hollered. "Want to make a couple guys happy?"

"You know what, *Zorba*," Malin said, irritated, "fuck you." She walked by the table and heard the men laughing and jeering at Yiannis. Malin kept going, immediately forgetting about them, hoping maybe she could find Gabriella on the beach.

Yiannis caught up to her. "Wait up. I'm sorry, I— *Wait*."

"Listen," she said without turning to look at him or breaking stride, "I don't have time for your shit today. I'm not kidding."

"OK." He paused. "What's going on?"

"Are you drunk? If you are, I don't even want to talk to you."

"Am I *drunk*?" Yiannis grabbed her hand. "Will you stop for a second? What the hell is happening?"

"Gabriella almost busted the door this morning coming into the house, out of her mind furious because she thinks Aidan's sleeping around."



Yiannis laughed. “That’s why you’re freaking out? That’s it?”

Malin started walking again. “I know it probably doesn’t mean much to you,” she said. “But could you still save me the witticisms, please.”

“You don’t understand. They do this every six months—and can you stop coming down on me; I said I was sorry.”

They reached the beach, but Malin couldn’t recognize anyone. No sign of Aley, Aidan or Gabriella. Just a few clients sitting at the bar, the dance floor empty. What did they usually do on Mondays? Malin wished Yiannis would just go away and that Gabriella would appear. And what if Yiannis had something to do with all of this? What if he had lied, just to mix it up, out of spite, or worse, boredom?

“Every six months?” she said.

“I’m telling you. It’s true. Twice or three times a year this happens. Aidan fucks around and Gabriella finds out or suspects something, then she freaks out and makes him pay for a couple of weeks, then it’s back to normal.”

Malin couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You’re full of shit.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “Ask anyone. It’s their regular routine. She’ll be mad for a while then he’ll get on his knees and do what he does; either apologize or convince her she’s wrong and she’ll pretend it never happened.”

“*Na vassi’s alati?*” Malin asked. “Are you adding salt?”

“I’m not. Honest.”

Malin sat down in the sand. She felt exhausted, so tired of all this. There were children dying in Africa, people suffering everywhere. She thought of the little boy she’d seen in Istanbul, punching himself in the face so he could get a little pity money from the tourists.

And what were they worried about? Who had slept with whom and why. She sighed.

“Don’t you ever get tired of all this shit?”

Yiannis sat next to her, pulling his knees to his chest. “You cold?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

He took off his sweater and put it on her shoulders. “What shit?”

“This,” Malin said. “You know? Drinking, girls—all of it.”

Yiannis cleared his throat as if he could barely contain a joke, but then, after a second,

“You’d rather be somewhere else?”

“But don’t you get bored? Always the same thing. Every day. Aren’t you tired of living in a place where you can’t cut your nails on Wednesdays or Fridays because it’s bad luck, where people think that if you leave your drawers open, everyone will talk behind your back?”

Yiannis didn’t say anything.

Of course he doesn’t know, she thought. He’s never left this place. This is all he cares about.

“Don’t you think,” Yiannis asked, “that maybe the best thing you can do is to be happy where you are, comfortable?”

Probably lifted straight from a movie. “But what did we ever do for the world? We just sit here like nothing else is going on. I don’t want to die and have two people only remember me for how much I could drink or how late I could stay up.” Malin tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I want more than this, you know?”

Yiannis didn’t seem to follow, but he humored her, probably just out of politeness. He got up after a moment and offered his hand. “Come on,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

They walked, loosely together, in silence. Malin thought of all of this. Was it supposed to be so hard? Did it have to be?

Yiannis led her to a field, east of the beach. She hadn't even paid attention to the path he'd taken. What was this place anyway? She didn't think there was a single spot in town she hadn't seen twice, especially near the beach.

Malin looked down at the ground as she followed, trying hard not to trip on a rock or a tree root. "Where are we going?" she asked, but Yiannis ignored the question.

"Do you have to control everything?" he asked in reply.

In the dark, Malin could barely see ahead of her; just the back of Yiannis' t-shirt, a moving green silhouette in the night. The shadows of mall cypress trees stood on guard in the field as if to certify that she hadn't left the island, hadn't left Greece. Looking down, she could make out the occasional familiar shape: a patch of tiny scarlet pimpernels then the droopy heads of a few campanula flowers like perfect Chinese lanterns. Late in the year for them to still be in bloom.

Yiannis stopped in front of a tree. It looked threatening, its spindly branches like a witch's crooked, arthritic fingers.

"The tree?" Malin asked.

"You know how old this thing is? Some people on the island think it's over three hundred."

"It's a lemon tree?"

"Orange," Yiannis said.

"What about it?"

“My grandfather says that during the war, when Greece was occupied by the Germans and Italians, there were about ten times more people living on the island than there are now. And Kythera got cut off. There wasn’t enough to eat. A lot of people died. Then somebody found this tree.”

“Isn’t that a Haitian folktale or something?”

“I’m telling you. My grandfather was there. They found this tree and didn’t know who owned the piece of land—probably some foreigner whose inheritors never bothered to come and claim it. So they picked all the oranges and fed as many people as they could. And the next time they came, they found the tree full of oranges again. So they picked those, and every time there were more. Nobody’s starved to death ever since.”

Such a terrible storyteller, Malin told herself. You couldn’t step on rock or turn a corner on the island without there being a story attached to the act or place. But nobody ever agreed on what that story was or what it meant. Yet there was something endearing about these myths being passed down from generation to generation, something she envied. So maybe this particular story was a load of crap. Probably was. But it still made the tree so much more beautiful in her eyes.

“About Aidan,” Yiannis said. “There is something.”

Malin turned to face him. In the dark, she could only see the outline of his face, the rough hewn chin, the aquiline nose, long, dark strands of hair hanging loosely on each side. He looked like the shadow of a football player, too large and bulky for the landscape him.

So, Malin thought, maybe he knows something. “You know who he slept with?”

“No,” Yiannis said. “But I have no doubt he did.”

Malin laughed. “You’re one to talk. Remember our little dinner.”

“You can’t be so hard on me. You’re so...sexy.”

Sexy. What a stupid word. “Yeah, well—”

“Listen,” Yiannis said. “At least I don’t operate under false pretenses.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“I mean Aidan.”

“What about him?” Malin asked.

“We played cards one night, and we weren’t even drinking. We both said how beautiful we thought you were, and he made a bet with everyone.”

“A bet?”

Yiannis nodded. “He told everyone he would sleep with you.”

“What?”

“He said he was going to fuck you.”

## TWENTY-ONE

Malin woke up late one morning in November. Wells had already left for Potamos with Aidan. She had turned in bed all night, finally falling asleep only after sunrise. A fine line between the best decisions and the greatest mistakes.

She made coffee and went back to the bedroom, taking her clothes from the closet and packing them in a large suitcase then filling a duffel bag with the rest. She felt like a teenage runaway.

Malin had lost count of the number of times she'd tried talking to Wells, or at least thought about talking to him. Hard to go from a bite of chicken to "There's something I need to say" without sounding dreadfully melodramatic. But what would she have said, given the opportunity? Was she even supposed to have talked about those things, or should they have taken care of themselves? More importantly, what could Wells really do about any of it? He had made it clear that he wanted to stay in Kythera, wanted to stay away from Montreal and his family. And if one thing was for certain, it's that Malin did not want to force his hand. She remembered too well how it had been when he'd moved back from Chicago and into his parents' house briefly. A thirty-year old man with a PhD living in a sad old house, still hung up on his ex-lover, trying to avoid her in the city. That was the only moment when she'd had doubts because he seemed so cynical, so troubled. Greece really had been good to him. There was no trace of that in him now. She could not ask him to leave.

And what could she do about his suspicions, his doubts? Malin had never been as faithful to anyone in her entire life as she had been to him all along. She wished she could have told him about how she had ended up pushing Aidan away in the morning because she couldn't

do that to Wells, because she loved him too much. There are things which you don't—can't—say. Like the week before, when Malin had found Wells in the bathroom trying to force a coat hanger down the pipe and how, later, he'd walked up to her and proudly announced that he had finally unplugged the sink. He hadn't even realized that Aidan had taken care of it a month before.

Malin went to the bathroom and gathered her things. Surprising how much you can accumulate in such a short time. She packed her toothbrush, hair products and threw out everything she didn't need. She looked at the box of condoms in the small medicine cabinet and decided to throw it away too. She did not want to have to think that he could use one from the same box with somebody else some day.

How awful, Malin thought, that he's going to walk in here tonight and find the place half empty and the trash cans full. If she could have thought of a better way, she would've avoided this.

She made the bed, careful to tuck the corners in the way Wells liked so that it looked neat, perfect. Malin went through the drawers quickly, making sure she didn't forget anything. It wasn't so much that she feared leaving something behind, but she just didn't want Wells to have to deal with a bra that would surface a year down the line. She wasn't heartless.

But she was a fool.

A fool for thinking people could change and that she could live a silly, girlish fantasy: to meet a dark, handsome and kind man from far away and disappear with him to a remote, nearly deserted island, hoping maybe that the world would forget about them or that they would forget about it. But she should've known better, should have listened to her father.

Malin pulled the cigar box from the drawer and sat on the bed. Her whole life in a small square box of balsa wood that still smelled of tobacco. She picked up the rusted key and twirled it in her hand, wondering what had become of the cottage in Visby. Some couple had bought it, probably, and turned it into a year-round house—no doubt the best place to raise kids. And what about Petr? She remembered taking the tie the day after he had moved in with her, and how she had made room for his clothes in the bedroom closet. She had felt so happy, so in love that night that she'd asked him to get drunk with her. And the kidney stone. How scared she had been, at fifteen, when she had found her mother on the floor, in the bathroom, passed out from the pain. All these little things that make up your past, your life.

She shoved everything in her bag then pulled out Elen's necklace. Looking at the pale green and blue glass beads on the thin silver string, she thought of her friend. What could she have become? All these years had passed, and not a single letter or phone conversation. Nothing.

When Malin had moved back to Sweden, she hadn't even visited her father. Instead, she had asked him to come meet her in Göteborg because she said she didn't have time. But the truth was, she was scared of running into Elen. Malin wanted to think of her friend as still thirteen, still exactly the way she pictured her when remembering their last summer in Visby.

When she looked in the mirror that year, Malin realized she had grown; she had breasts, thighs and tiny little crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes. The same thing had to have happened to Elen. But there was something profoundly unsettling in that. Malin preferred to imagine her friend as forever thirteen, and therefore not a victim of the many infamies of adolescence and adulthood. "Everybody wishes for eternity," her father used to say, "but nobody knows what to do on Sunday mornings." So true.



On the ferry back from Visby that summer, she had spent the whole ride on the top deck, leaning against the rail, with Elen at her side. They did not talk for the first hour. What could she say? Elen didn't know about the divorce or about the possible move to America. Malin didn't want that hanging between them. If Elen had noticed something unusual in the way Malin acted, she hadn't said a word. "In the village where my father was born," Elen finally said, breaking the silence, "they say that if a child is born at high tide, she will go far, and if she is born at ebb tide, she will be a scoundrel." She seemed to consider this for an instant. "Which one do you think you are, Mal?"

"I don't know," Malin said. "You?"

"I think you're like a cat. You could be happy anywhere as long as there was something to eat and a good place to sleep with a little sun."

Malin laughed. "I mean which one do you think you are?"

"Me? I don't know."

Malin would get in her car and drive to the ferry station, get off at Piraeus, then just keeping driving. As far as she could, as far as the car would let her. Or better, just to the airport. Dump the car there and get a flight somewhere. To Göteborg. Maybe Stockholm. That was home, after all.

Malin sat in the kitchen with a piece of paper. How to explain this: She needed to think about things. She didn't want Wells to get it touch with her, to write or call. She didn't want him to wait either. She knew she would never see him again. Or maybe she would. Who knew? How could anybody ever be sure of anything anyway? Greece already felt so far behind.

She placed the cigar box—Wells' razor and shirt button inside—on the table, next to the blank piece of paper and got up to leave. She shut all the windows and returned to the table. "I

love you,” she started writing but then scratched that. “Leave it,” she wrote in perfect block letters before stepping out.

Maybe after too much happiness, one starts looking for a way out of it, a break from it. It grows uncomfortable after a while.

After too much happiness, one wishes for a disaster, a flood or an earthquake, for a change of pace, for any kind of salvation, because it becomes more and more clear that nothing will ever measure up again.

## **EPILOGUE**

When the plane touched ground in Montreal, Wells realized that he had forgotten his watch in one of the suitcases. He had no idea of the time. Probably early evening. To avoid standing with his head bent under the luggage compartment, he waited until the line started moving, then grabbed his things and cut in.

The Trudeau airport was quiet. Only a droning, electronic voice kept repeating directions for the customs in French. When he got there, he was happy to see a short line; after sitting in a plane for hours, breathing in the recycled air and chewing over recycled thoughts, he needed to be outside now.

The agent barely asked a few questions. Wells probably looked too tired to awaken any suspicions. He got through and nodded at the female customs officer sitting by the sliding doors that opened onto the lobby of the arrival terminal.

Walking downtown, in front of McGill, the leaves rustled on the sidewalk and the cold stung Wells' cheeks. He heard the sound of a cello drifting out from an open window in the Strathcona building. Maybe Anna practicing or teaching a class.

Wells could walk to his father's office from there, show up unexpectedly and announce that he was back, that he'd finally decided to take the reins of the company, promise that he would never leave them again. Or he could go into the music department building, right then, and get Anna. Tell her he had missed her all this time, that Greece had been just an attempt at forgetting but that it had failed miserably.

Or he could get a cab back to Trudeau and jump on a plane to Stockholm. Malin had to be there, somewhere.

Winter was coming. Wells could smell it in the air. Down below, on Ste-Catherine's, the strip-club barkers were luring people into bars with the bait of beautiful and wildly promiscuous women, while out east the squeegee kids tried to scrounge enough change to buy hot soup or coffee at *Tim's*. Closer to him, in Chinatown, lacquered ducks hung in the steamed shop windows, just waiting to be picked up by young and hip businessmen on their way home to the Mile-End from the office.

And in Westmount, the steady blue light of wide-screen television sets hypnotized the city's leaders with back-to-back hockey games and the promise of miracle cures for impotence while their lonely, docile wives got ready for bed, his mother among them, probably wondering how her children fared, thinking maybe things could have been different, maybe she could have done better somehow.

Wells opened his suitcase, pulled out an old jacket and put it on. Light caressed the domed copper roof of the university's museum building. He closed his eyes and let the crowd wash over him.

## **VITA**

Philippe Custeau was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada. He attended McGill University in Montreal and received both his B.S. and D.C. degrees from Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa.