

Greece

The party was being held on the rooftop patio which was quickly filling up with people, each of whom Em greeted warmly at the front door, introducing me as they filed past through the kitchen and up the stairs. Em's apartment was at the top of a hill looking out over the bay. Below, you could see white stucco buildings studding gray stone hills, scragles of olive trees clinging to the slate. White crests billowed on the edges of crashing sapphire waves, the white-blue sky endless to the horizon. A dark pair of sunglasses did little to tone down the glaring view, a white sun washing things out like an over-exposed film strip. The smell of the salt spray somehow managed to waft up to the rooftop, mixing with the scent of cooking lamb and fetta. Em had a knack for finding living spaces with country-specific charm and amazing vistas.

We were in Greece, the summer between my junior and senior years of college. My sister had decided that I was old enough to make my own plans, even though she was the one who had invited me to stay with her for the entire summer, had paid for the plane ticket, had convinced Mom that a young man of my age could handle himself in a foreign country. She couldn't take three months off of work but promised that once I'd met some people I'd have plenty to do without her. Greece was the sixth country Em had lived in, in as many years. I had been to visit her in each one, though usually only for a couple of weeks and with her constant supervision, so I guess she figured I should know the ropes. By the time she died, Em would have lived in twenty three different countries, and I would have visited her in every one of them. I never did get the hang of traveling, though, and would get terrible culture shock everywhere I went.

Barely over my jetlag, only my third day in her white stucco apartment, I didn't know any locals and hadn't had the energy to wander the streets aimlessly looking for some. Em was throwing one of her famous week-day evening parties in my honor, and from experience I knew

that this was the best place to meet everyone who was worth meeting, who knew how to speak English, and might invite me for exciting Grecian adventures. Em collected people the way a magnet will collect metal shavings from a worktable.

The sound of Em's robust laugh punctured through the sound of American music streaming from an American radio station on the laptop in a corner and the odd cadence of twenty or so Greek voices trying to sound like Katie Couric or Matthew McConaughey, with varying degrees of success. She glowed like buttered toast at the edge of the topaz-blue pool. In her left hand she held a glass of who-knows-what and her right was flapping through the air as she spoke, a clear sign of her Americanness. She was talking to a Greek man whose name I can't remember, a Jason or Adonis, his black hair slicked back, white teeth flashing as he laughed at whatever my sister said, saline water beading on his perfectly hairless chest. He ran some fancy restaurant nearby which Em had promised to take me to, but only because he had been standing there. I knew she had laid in a prodigious supply of inauthentic foods in preparation for my coming. I was not what you'd call an adventurous eater. I hadn't touched any of the kebabs, veggies, cheeses or rare fruits that had been set out for the guests. I was, instead, hovering over the tray of Ritz's with CheezWhiz sprayed on the top, sent via FedEx by our mother the week before my departure for my express benefit. Mom and Dad only saw Em about once a year when she flew us all out to wherever she was for Christmas. (Em was also famous for her Christmas parties, bringing a flavor of American Commercial Spiritualism to her ignorant and deprived foreign friends.) Mom had only recently begun to stop complaining about the fact that Em had not touched American soil since she left for Europe and her pleading calls for Em to come home had reduced from once a week to once a month. It would be another couple of years before Mom would accept that Em wasn't coming home again, but I didn't mind; the middle class

Midwesterners I attended college with were impressed by my relation to a bona-fide European jet-setter and I at least saw my sister several times a year.

The guests were all talking and laughing loudly, but I couldn't understand what any of them were saying, mostly because they kept slipping into Greek. I was wearing a t-shirt that said "It's all Greek to me," but hadn't gotten so much as a curious glance, except from Em, who had burst out laughing when she saw it. Although I was supposed to be meeting people in order to make plans for the summer, most of the guests were more Em's age, meaning ten years older than myself, and weren't paying much attention to the younger brother of their hostess. That was fine with me. I didn't feel like explaining what a major in computer engineering had to do with a minor in Japanese the way I had in France, or trying to find excuses for declining invitations to take a ride on some stranger's speed boat or out to some other stranger's great grandfather's vineyard the way I had in Italy. I was happy to wallflower in the shade with my tray of CheezWhized Ritz's, watching the party happen around me. Bikini clad women dipped in and out of the pool while men in flipflops and open white-linen shirts watched. An early arrival tended the grill and my sister flitted between the groups of youngish professionals, laughing loudly and filling half empty cups, a social butterfly in her element. Suddenly, she looked up and caught my eye from across the rooftop. She wiggled her fingers at me and I raised a hand in return. She smiled and cocked her head to the side, asking me if I was having a good time. I shrugged. Em nodded once, indicating the tray of crackers beside me, holding back a laugh because I was the only one who had touched them. I released a chuckle with my smile. I thought it was funny too. Em turned back to her friends and I watched her for a moment. The sun had bleached her hair from the dark auburn I remembered to a flaming orange, hanging halfway down her back like a flag on a windless day. She had been heavy in high school, but had lost all

of the weight right before she'd moved to Europe, while she'd been sick. In her over large sunglasses and green bikini, she still looked like a recovering chemo patient to me. She never would put the weight back on.

Bored with my crackers, I wandered over to the pool chairs tucked safely under the canopy and plopped down. The sun was declining slowly and I figured I still had several hours before the party would even start to break up. Eventually, Em would notice that I wasn't talking to anyone on my own, would pull me away from my quite comfortable solitude and force me into making friends. To forestall the inevitable, I pulled one of the many scrapbooks Em always had sitting about into my lap and started flipping through the pages. It was an old one and I hadn't seen any of the pictures for years. They were of a hiking trip we had taken in Mohican State Park when I was a freshman in high school. Mostly they were of river scenes and trees and rock formations Em had thought were interesting.

“Which one is that?”

I squinted up at a woman standing over my chair in a pencil skirt and a white blouse I couldn't quite see through: a new arrival. Without waiting for me to answer, she slid into the chair next to mine and pulled the book into her lap. She had long brown hair and the olive complexion of a stereotypical Greek beauty, but she spoke with very little accent. She did not bother to introduce herself and since I was the only pale, blonde haired, blue eyed, American accented twenty something male around, there was no need for me to introduce myself.

“I love these picture-books,” the woman said, flipping through the pages quickly, barely glancing at the pictures, careless of the crafty selections of paper and stickers Em had surrounded them with.

“Ah, this must be you!” The woman jabbed her finger at the page, sliding a look at me, matching my fourteen-year old features with the young man sitting beside her. I waited for her to ask me more: about myself, about the trip, about the pictures. Instead, she looked back at the book, flipping another page.

“This is Emily,” she said, holding the book up to her face, “Look how young she is!” She did not comment on the size difference, which I thought was kind. The pictures had been taken pre-chemo.

“Who is this?” She tilted the book towards me so I could see who else was in the picture.

“That’s Alan,” I answered without thinking.

“Who’s Alan?” the woman asked. I opened my mouth to answer, but stopped. Em never told her friends, no matter where she moved, and it wasn’t my place to. There were plenty of pictures of him still in my parent’s house, but it was a little bit of a shock to see one of him here. In the picture, he and I stood next to each other, shirts off, dripping sweat, posing awkwardly. We had just finished a five mile hike uphill with the bulging backpacks Em had refused to carry.

“C’mon, honey,” Alan had whined, “We look horrible.”

“You look like people who just climbed a big hill,” Em replied, her camera already focusing as we poured water from our water bottles over our heads, “You know, all manly.” We both knew she wouldn’t leave it alone until we posed so we did and she walked away to take more pictures of fallen trees and interesting patterns in the dirt.

“Is she always like this?” Alan asked me under his breath while she was distracted.

“You think this is bad? Last summer she went through three rolls of film in one day at Cedar Point.” I laughed and Alan grimaced.

“There’s a waterfall not too much farther,” Em told us as she returned, “We should stop there for our lunch.” Alan agreed and then headed up the path in front of us. I pulled my t-shirt back over my head and Em wrapped an arm around my waist. I was already a head taller than her, so she couldn’t reach my shoulders, or ruffle my hair the way she had when I was younger and she was taking me out to a movie or mini-golf. Some girls might have been jealous of a new brother after being an only child for ten years, but that was not Em.

“He’s nice,” I told her, since that was the question on her face.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, he’s not as cool as me, but who is?” I grinned and Em laughed, shaking her head. She nodded at the trail, we needed to catch up with Alan, but I could tell she was pleased and I was glad.

We had gone back to Mohican a few times after that and I wondered if Em had meant to put out one of those scrapbooks, instead of this one. The woman was still waiting for me to answer her question, one finely-sculpted eyebrow lifted and her head cocked to the left.

“Diana!” Em saved me, appearing out of the sun with a smile, “I’m glad you made it! I see you’ve met my brother”

“Yes,” Diana replied, rising from her pool chair to kiss my sister’s cheek, “We were just looking at one of your picture-books”

“It’s the one from Mohican,” I said, watching Em’s face carefully. Her expression did not change, but her eyes darted to me. Did I tell? I shook my head once.

“Really? I didn’t realize I’d set that one out,” she said, “You know, Diana here runs a tourist company. She could probably give you a really great tour sometime.”

“Yes,” Diana said, turning back to me, “Where have you seen already?”

“Um, the airport?” I replied. Em was already walking away, called by a woman who appeared to have set her hair on fire by standing too close to the grill.

“What! You can not come to Greece and see the airport! Come!” I found myself being pulled by the wrist out of my seat and across the patio, down the stairs and out Em’s front door. Diana pulled me right across the white-gravel drive way and pushed me into her tiny black convertible.

“Eh, won’t Em wonder where I am?” I asked as she slid into the seat beside me and revved the engine.

“She’ll know,” Diana said vaguely and pushed her stiletto heeled shoe down on the accelerator, twisting the wheel sharply and spinning the car out of its haphazard parking spot before rocketing down the steeply inclined road. Trees and bushes blurred past in green and brown stripes, which quickly turned to gray and terra cotta as Diana raced through the city. She hardly slowed down at all as we passed buzzing café’s and crowds of people pouring onto what appeared to be party barges docked in the harbor. I clutched the armrest, white knuckled, and tried to keep my eyes trained on the road in front of us. Diana dodged and weaved through traffic with practiced ease, her slim, brown hand wrapped around the gear shift, her left foot pumping the clutch in rhythm with my choking gasps.

“So, where are we going?” I managed to ask, trying not to stare at her sun glazed knee peeking out from her pencil skirt.

“I will take you to Emily’s favorite spot of Greece,” she replied.

The sun finally descended below the horizon as we raced out of town again, up another hill. The road twisted along the edge of a cliff, flat, but barely two yards from a precipice completely unprotected by guardrails or retaining wall or even warning signs. We cruised

silently as the darkness deepened, the ocean stretching out endlessly on the right and the empty fields of grasses and olive trees on the left fading away into shadow. If I squinted and ignored the strong scent of salt water permeating everything, I could almost imagine that those were fields of corn, august-tall, and I was shooting through the darkness with some Midwestern girl on our way to the drive-in.

Diana slammed the brakes on without warning. My seatbelt cut into my chest as she swung off the road and into the grasses on the left. She hadn't said a word the entire trip and I couldn't imagine what could be out here in the random countryside.

"Come," Diana said as she slipped out of the car. She left the headlights on, shining straight ahead in two narrow beams, illuminating what looked like some crumbling stone walls overcome by weeds. I followed her as she picked her way towards them carefully and then turned back to stare out at the ocean. The moon hung low over the water, but despite its white glow the darkness was thick. I could see why Em might like it here: she liked desolate cliffs overlooking the sea.

"You know the Battle of Thermopylae?" she asked.

"Sure. Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans."

"These American movies are not so historically accurate," Diana scoffed.

"Yeah, it didn't even mention General Themistocles and the navy or the Thespians and Thebans that backed up the Spartans," I agreed. Diana gave me a quick smile. The top half of her face was illuminated in silver by the full moon but the bottom half was gold from the headlights.

"But what none of the stories tell, even the histories, is the tale of the Persian who made it through the lines." She turned back to the stone ruins and pointed at them, "This is what is left of a small village which nobody remembers the name of anymore. From this village came a sailor

who brought many things back from other countries, including a slave woman once. And this Persian found his way from Xerxes' army to this cliff and told the Greek, 'This is my sister that was stolen from me ten years ago. I have searched many lands far from our home for her. I am taking her home now, and I will kill anyone who tries to stop me.'"

Diana spoke swiftly, but evenly and I could almost see the Persian and the Greek, facing off in the middle of the village, the sister crouching in fear behind her master, unable to believe her brother had come to rescue her. The Greek challenged the Persian to a battle, which, according to Diana, lasted for hours. In the end, the Greek put his sword through the Persian's stomach and he bled to death on the cliff, his head cradled in his weeping sister's lap. Diana pointed to the ground beneath my feet, maybe just for effect.

"That is where he died and where they built his funeral pyre. When his body was nothing but ashes, the Greek man turned to his slave and said, 'Your brother has given his life for yours. Live it well' and he found a ship that would take her home and she returned to her family. They say she still haunts this cliff."

"Why would she haunt it if she got to go home?" I asked, confused.

"They say she came to find her brother, but did not find him here."

Diana headed back to the car but I stood on some ancient Persian's funeral site, wondering if even my death would get Em to come back home, and why this was her favorite bit of Greece.

After the someone-died-here sightseeing, Diana drove me through the city, pointing out clubs and cafes and shops in a voice I could tell she used on fun-seeking tourists. It was late by

the time she dropped me off in front of Em's apartment, although the darkness hadn't yet been touched by the encroaching sun. There were no cars or scooters left out front and all of the windows were dark, so the party must've broken up quite a while ago. I opened the front door slowly and tip-toed through the living room, hoping not to wake Em. To my surprise, I heard the sound of someone walking around filtering down the stairwell from the roof. I headed back up to the pool area, wondering who could still be hanging around. But there was no one on the roof except Em.

She stood at the other end of the rooftop, the bright moonlight silhouetting her against the dark sky. She had thrown a white t-shirt and a pair of jean shorts over her bikini, but her hair was still hanging loose down her back, fluttering in the late night breeze. From where I was I couldn't see her face, but her arms were wrapped around herself as if fending off a blast of chilly air. She was staring out over the bay, gazing into the darkness as if she could see something out there. There was nothing to see but black sea and empty air. With the city quiet and the music off, you could hear every wave below as it crashed onto the rocky shore. Em, it seemed to me, was standing a little too close to the edge of the roof, from which the hill we were on top of plummeted straight down to the ocean without so much as a guard rail. She moved, slightly, and the moonbeams bounced off of her skin. In the silver light she looked gaunt and exhausted, her arms and legs slick and bony, her ribs poking through the thin t-shirt. And then for a second, just a second, I thought I could see right through her, right through her body out to the dark ocean. I could see the little pinpricks of light shining from the early morning trollers heading toward the fishing waters right through her chest, the thin line of the horizon cutting through her neck, the stars glinting through her skull. For that moment, the only part of Em that remained on the planet was a ghost, a memory in my own mind. Then, just as suddenly, her body was solid again: thin

and wasted, but there. I had a sudden urge to pick her up, tuck her into bed and call a doctor. Instead, I sniffed loudly to announce my presence and started to cross the patio. Em threw a glance over her shoulder and reached down for the half full black trash bag at her feet.

“Did you just get back?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Everybody gone?”

“Yep,” she answered. “Everybody left. They always do. Eventually” I looked around the patio: there was still quite a mess. Em moved around, dumping plastic cups with cigarette butts floating in them and crumb-ridden paper plates into her bag.

“Why don’t you leave this till morning?” I asked.

“I have to teach in the morning,” she said, throwing another cup into the bag, “And I don’t want it to sit here all day.”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind.” I took the bag from her and set it next to the now empty buffet table, “C’mon, go to bed, you look exhausted.” Em let me push her toward the door, her steps shuffling and her head drooping. At the first step she stopped and turned around.

“Hey, thanks,” she said as if I had just offered to give her a kidney. I wondered how many times she had been left to clean up all by herself in the dark.