

## The Better-Looking Us

Renee woke when a crack of lightning striped the bedroom wall. She rolled off the bed; prints from the tangled sheets stuck to her skin in thin lines like palm fronds. She flung open the sheer curtains leading to their curved slit of a balcony and stumbled onto the little platform. It was overcast, and although the sky was a grainy sheet of gray, it was sharp and bright out. She grabbed her robe from the back of a chair and wrapped it around her new, slender body. She caught her reflection in the black TV screen on the way to the bathroom and smiled. She felt the similar elation she'd been feeling for the past month or so thanks to her thin, improved body.

As she slathered lavender soap over her body in the shower, she felt a bulge at the bottom left side of her left breast. She ran her fingers over it and pressed against her armpit to make sure she had indeed felt something. *Oh god, of course. I have everything I've ever wanted and it's all going to be taken from me.*

Renee sat in bed with her towel wrapped around her long blonde hair and a thick cotton robe around her body. She chewed on a nail as she flicked through her phone of the few photos she had saved of their wedding. One of her bridesmaids had rounded up all the pictures guests had taken and texted them to Renee on her way to the airport. She was grateful now for the pictures. She'd worn a sleek, bright white silk dress her mother would have hated. Jamie burst through the door. He took out his headphones and flopped belly first onto the bed beside her.

"I'm wiped," he said. "It's disgusting out." Renee didn't say anything. She started to pull at a hangnail that had started to sprout on her middle finger. She stood from the bed and grabbed a water bottle from the mini fridge. She pressed it against the back of Jamie's neck. He winced and rolled over onto his back. "Thanks love," he said, sitting up

and pulling Renee onto his lap. Renee brought Jamie's hand to her breast to feel the lump she'd felt in the shower.

"Yes, right there. Do you feel something?"

"No, I don't."

"Are you sure?"

"What, do you *want* me to feel something?"

"Of course not, what kind of question is that?" She pushed his hand off her and stood up to pace the room. She poked the side of her breast again, but it felt fine, normal even. Had she made up the lump? She couldn't have. Why would she have done such a thing in the first place?

"I'm sorry, Ree. I don't feel anything. Want me to take a closer look, call the hotel doctor?"

"Is there such a thing as a hotel doctor? I thought they were only in movies."

"Of course they're real. Want me to call one?"

"No, no that's okay." He raised his eyebrows. "Really, I'm sure it's okay. I'm okay."

"I'm going to hop in the shower then."

"Okay," she said, smiling.

How had it only been a week? She was starting to feel anxious about getting back to the city. She stepped onto the little balcony and looked down at the street. It was so overcast she wondered when it was going to start raining. The air felt thick and heavy.

A woman in a blue and white striped shirtdress with a thin brown belt around her waist trotted down the street carrying a wicker basket. Her brown floppy hat blew off her head. She turned to look at it snaking its way back up the hill before she took off running

to get it. She was laughing as a man came running down to meet her with the hat in his hand. They threw their arms around each other as he picked her up, swung her around, and set her back on her feet to continue down the hill.

Renee felt as though she'd just seen a perfume commercial. She suddenly, absolutely *had* to meet this woman, this couple. She slipped on her one-piece swimsuit and a linen dress and almost smacked into Jamie as he walked out of the shower.

"Whoa, whoa I thought we could stay in today. Relax in the room, maybe grab dinner in the restaurant next door?"

"But it's so nice out!" she said, smiling, gesturing toward the window. A clap of thunder struck just then. Renee laughed. "Honestly, I feel kind of stir crazy."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"Of course," she said. She smiled at him and ran a hand down his arm.

"Alright, give me a few minutes to get ready."

"Okay," she said.

They headed out through the hotel, stepping onto the sparkly mosaic street just as the first drops of rain split through the sky.

"Ugh," she said.

"I told you a day inside would have been nice." Renee looked around for the couple she'd seen earlier, ignoring Jamie. She wondered if they'd gone back to their hotel, or if they were braving the rain and sitting out on the beach. She and Jamie walked along the border of the sand close to the few scattered restaurants that lined the makeshift boardwalk. There! There they were, the couple. They were drinking glasses of red wine and splitting a caprese salad. The woman was dipping a bread crust into a pool of olive oil.

“Let’s eat here,” Renee said. She wasn’t particularly hungry; it was only eleven. The bartender told them to seat themselves anywhere. Renee chose a table in line with the other couple with a table between them. “Let’s order some wine,” Renee said.

“Doesn’t it bother your acid reflux?” Jamie asked. Renee swatted him away with her hand. She hated to think of her recent ailment, the acrid liquid that ran down the back of her throat like vinegar.

“It’s fine,” she hissed. “Two glasses of Pinot Noir, per favore,” Renee half-shouted at the bartender. Renee whispered to Jamie, “Look at the couple at the other table, right there.” He raised an eyebrow. “They look...just like us, don’t they?”

“What do you mean?”

“She looks just like me only, I don’t know, different, obviously. Prettier.”

“That’s not true,” Jamie said quickly.

“No really. I’m not trying to be self-deprecating, it’s just a fact. She’s prettier than me, but she looks just like me.”

“So you’re saying the man is too? He’s more attractive than me?”

“No, I didn’t say that. I never said that.” It was ridiculous how sensitive Jamie could be about his looks; his handsomeness was so obvious it was almost an affront.

“Then what do you mean?” he said, raising his voice.

“Oh, are you two also American?” the woman from the other table asked. Renee and Jamie looked at her and Renee saw that Jamie now understood what she had been trying to articulate—this woman looked just like her, but was an airbrushed, more put-together, more angular and polished version of herself; if you blinked, you’d mistake either of them for the other down to their long, shiny blonde hair. Renee couldn’t help but stare.

“Yes, we are,” Renee said.

“Where are y’all from?”

“We’re from New York.”

“Oh the Big Apple, wow! We’re from Tennessee.” Renee nodded. Yes, I can hear that, she thought. “Are you two honeymooning here?” the woman asked.

“We are.”

“Oh my gosh, so are we, aren’t we honey?” Honey groaned something in agreement. “I’m Delilah, Lila for short, Lil for even shorter. And this is Sam, my husband.”

“I’m Renee and this is Jamie, *my* husband. Wow that’s so weird to say.”

“How do you do?” Delilah said, giggling. “Sorry, this is what, our third glass of wine? It’s just so dreadful outside, isn’t it? What else is there to do but drink their *delicious* wine?”

“I kind of like when it’s gloomy like this,” Renee said.

“You do?” Jamie said. Renee kicked him under the table.

“Yes, I do,” she snipped. The two couples smiled politely at each other and went back to having their own separate conversations. Toward the end of the meal, and after another glass of wine, Renee leaned over toward the other couple.

“I have something I kind of wanted to tell you earlier,” she started.

“Really?” Delilah said. Sam was signing the check.

“I wanted to tell you that when I first saw you, well, that you both are like the better looking versions of us,” she said, stumbling slightly over her words, pointing to herself and Jamie. Jamie choked on his water. Sam looked up from the bill.

He watched Delilah and Renee ogling each other before saying, “Why don’t you join us for a drink at our hotel later tonight? Tomorrow is our last day in this paradise and we love collecting fellow Americans abroad.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful. Don’t you think honey?” Renee said. Jamie gritted his teeth.

“Of course.”

After they ironed out the details, Delilah said, “Well, we best be going. We’ll see y’all tonight! And Renee, don’t be silly. We’re nothing like you glamorous city folk. *You* are a great looking couple.” She fit her hat back on her head and led Sam out of the restaurant, wobbling on her heels. Who wore heels on the cobbled streets here? Renee thought. It had stopped raining. Sam put his hand on the small of Delilah’s back as they rounded the corner and disappeared.

“You know, she’s right,” Jamie said. He reached for Renee’s hand and ran his thumb over her skin. She relaxed. “We are a great looking couple.” Renee smiled, tightly.

She took another sip of wine when Jamie said, “Did you hear the way Sam said, ‘collecting fellow Americans?’ It was weird, did you find that weird too?”

She just laughed and leaned forward, kissing Jamie. His green eyes suddenly seemed duller, washed out like the sky. She looked away at the small, lapping Mediterranean waves. The image of Delilah’s lips suddenly struck her—they were so full, flushed red as though she’d just orgasmed. She’d worn tiny gold hoops in her small ears, her hands adorned in dainty gold rings and a massive, teardrop-shaped diamond. Her blonde hair was smooth and long as though it was just blown out in a salon, not at all

affected by the onslaught of humidity and rain. Renee pulled her own hair back into a ponytail.

She smiled at Jamie and said, "Let's get going. We can spend the rest of the day in bed, and get that pesto pasta for dinner brought up later."

On their walk back to the hotel, Jamie said, "We're not seriously going to their hotel for drinks tonight, are we?"

"Oh, I think we should. You know, my parents never talked to other couples when they used to travel. They always seemed so sad and lonely to me."

"Maybe they liked being that way; maybe they chose to keep to themselves."

"They *did* choose that. That's the point. I don't want to be that way. I want to make friends when we travel, have meals and drinks with other people, be friendly."

"Why? We're never going to see them again."

"So? That's not the point. In fact, it's the opposite of the point. It's just to have fun and enjoy the company of strangers."

"Is my company not enough for you?"

"Jamie, why do you always have to turn the conversation into a personal attack on you?"

"I'm not. I just don't get it. This is *our* honeymoon, *our* time to enjoy each other."

"We have our whole lives to do that."

That evening, they walked up the hill to Sam and Delilah's hotel. It was drizzling out. Renee tried to cover her head with her purse. The sky was pitch black with no moon, but lampposts lit the mosaic path, catching the glint of a shiny, jagged piece every so often and causing a bright dash of light for them to step through. Renee and Jamie held hands, refreshed from the sex and the nap and the pasta. She gripped his bicep

with her other arm as they made their way up the windy hill. The hotel was at the very top of the hill, secluded in a lush overgrowth of bushes and lemon trees. They walked through the large, open iron gates into a courtyard with a huge porcelain fountain of angels spitting water.

“It’s gaudy, don’t you think?” Jamie said. It wasn’t quite a palace, but wasn’t small enough to be a villa either. It was painted a bright lemon color with trees lining the exterior of the drive. They made their way to the front door feeling as though they were walking through Eden itself. They rang the front doorbell and a man in a suit opened the door.

“We’re here to see Sam and Delilah...oh gosh, I don’t even know their last name.” Renee looked helplessly at Jamie who shrugged. Renee felt guilty for making them come here to get drinks with strangers who, Jamie was right, they would never see again. Maybe they should have just stayed snuggled up in bed. Delilah came running through the lobby to the front door. She poked her head over the man’s shoulder before brushing past him and grabbing onto Renee’s wrist.

“You made it! Come, right this way. Thanks ‘Cesco!” Renee cringed at Delilah’s accent and her given nickname for the doorman. Why hadn’t her drawl bothered her before? Delilah’s hair was in a high ponytail with a baby blue bandana tied around her head. “Isn’t this ridiculous?” she said, leading them into the open air courtyard with yet another massive fountain. “Sam found it. It’s so absurd, right?” Renee and Jamie simultaneously wondered how much staying in a place like this would cost.

“It sure is something,” Jamie said. Renee stuck her hand up the back of his polo and rubbed his smooth back. She then stuck her hand in his back pocket.

“Y’all look nice and refreshed. Have a siesta?”



“We did,” Renee said, squeezing Jamie’s butt through his pants. They walked through the courtyard into the second half of the hotel. At the back was a glass bar bathed in a soft yellow light which illuminated the bottles of alcohol behind the bar. “This is so...swanky. I never knew places like this existed here,” Renee said.

“Isn’t it just to die for? Let’s get some drinks.” When they each had a glass, the three of them cheered. “Drinks on us, just charge it to room 303.”

“No, we couldn’t Delilah,” Renee said. Delilah placed her hands on Renee’s waist, pulling her in slightly, and stared into her eyes with her bright violet ones.

“Lil, call me Lil please,” she said very seriously. “And yes you can. Vacation friends are the best kind of friends.”

“Why?” Renee said. She could already feel the melon liquor snaking its way to her brain, making everything feel syrupy and soft.

“Because you never have to see each other again, that’s why!” she laughed.

“Right,” Renee said. “Where’s Sam?”

“Oh, I think he’s still freshening up.” It was clear she had already been drinking. Her eyes looked lazy; she couldn’t focus on anything for too long. Her eyelids were slower to reopen after she blinked. “Do you think marriage will be a bore?” she asked Renee. She was sitting on a barstool and motioned for Renee to do the same. Jamie whispered into Renee’s ear that he was going to go for a walk and explore the hotel. She nodded as he left the bar with drink in hand.

“I don’t know,” she said. “My parents had a very unhappy marriage.”

“So did mine,” Lil slurred. “But Sam, Sam’s different. People always say ‘you know when you know’ and I just hate that phrase, don’t you? I hate all those dumb phrases.”

“I do too,” Renee said, and suddenly felt a warm rush of love toward Lil. She knew exactly what she meant, and she loved how open and friendly Lil was.

Lil continued, “That’s not to say I didn’t know with Sam, because I did. I really did know. Everything just seemed to click, to fall together. I’m so happy sometimes I think I might die.”

“Just this morning I thought I felt a lump on my breast. My mother died from breast cancer recently. But I had Jamie feel for it and I looked again, and it was gone. Did I make it up? Or am I just scared?”

“I’m really sorry about your mom,” Lil said. “What do you mean?” She was drinking another peach-colored drink. She plucked the cherry out of the glass, bit into it, then stuck the stem in her mouth.

“Am I just scared that I suddenly have everything I’ve ever wanted after wanting it for so long? Do I think I’m going to die because I don’t feel like I deserve everything I have?” Lil spit out the stem, perfectly knotted, onto the bar just as Sam approached them.

“Hiya ladies. Where’d Jamie run off to?”

“I think he’s just wandering around.”

“You should go find him, Sammy.” He kissed the top of Lil’s head and left to find Jamie. Lil twisted a thick bracelet on her wrist. Renee noticed dark purple bruising turning lilac on her wrist. Lil said, “You’re not going to die.”

“I know,” Renee said, wondering about the bruises.

“And you do deserve to be happy,” she said. *Did she put her bracelets on too tight? Did she fall in those ridiculous heels of hers on the mosaiced paths?* Renee

already knew the answer, could feel it in the pit of her stomach like a fat drop of rain smacking pavement.

“I’ll try one of those,” Renee said, pointing to Lil’s glass. She wasn’t much of a drinker, especially since her acid reflux had begun flaring up before the wedding; it felt like there was lightning in her chest most days. But she was relaxed now and on vacation, grabbing drinks with someone she’d never see again. She could enjoy herself with a drink or two, or was it three now?

“I’m worried I’ll do something unforgivable and he’ll leave me,” Lil said.

“What could you possibly do that would make Sam leave you, Lil?” she said.

Their heads were so close together they were almost touching. Renee pictured someone standing behind them, looking into the indecipherable mass of blonde hair. She thought of her mother’s head, which she’d refused to shave through the few months of chemo she endured; her scalp was splotted with brown stains, patches of her leftover honey blonde hair hanging on as though they had been glued to her head like a child’s art project. Renee sighed. Would she ever stop having these images float to the surface of her thoughts, even when she was on a different continent far, far away from home?

“Are you thinking of your mom?” Lil asked. Renee nodded. She swirled her straw in the glass, knocking against the ice cubes. “I’m sorry she never got to see you married.”

“She would’ve hated my dress.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“No, she really would have.”

“Tell me a secret,” Lil said. “Anything. Something you’ve never told anyone.”

“I don’t think I have any secrets, does that count as one?”

“Nope.”

“I can’t think, I can’t think,” Renee said.

“Aw, come on.” Renee noticed Lil’s voice was suddenly lucid now, her movements sharp and pointed. Renee looked down at her murky gray mojito. She paused, staring at the floating mint leaves and thought, There’s no way. She shook the idea of it just as quickly as it had come, but couldn’t remember having ordered a mojito. She had never felt as drunk as she did now; she’d never lost count of how many drinks she had, not even in college. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. Had she been drugged?

Lil traced a finger up and down Renee’s forearm. It felt good at first, so good Renee thought she was beginning to fall asleep. Then it stopped feeling like anything. It was as though her arm were no longer her arm even though she was staring right at it. Lil undid Renee’s low ponytail and began to play with the ends of her hair. How did she know that was Renee’s favorite thing in the whole world? She relaxed into the feeling, like threads were tickling and electrifying her scalp down to the ends of each strand. The bar swirled and glowed in front of her. Lil took off her sandal and began to run her big toe against Renee’s bare ankle. Little dots of sweat began to poke from Renee’s skin, first her upper lip, then in the creases of her elbows; her arm hair stood on edge.

Renee rested her head on her arms on top of the bar. “I think I may have had too much to drink.” Jamie stormed into the bar and crashed into Renee’s chair. He grunted, “Let’s go.”

“Babe, what are you doing?” Renee said.

Lil tossed her hair over her shoulder and crossed her arms against her chest. “We were just about to have some fun.”

“What happened Jamie baby?” Renee said.

“Sam had a little too much fun in the den,” Jamie said toward both of them. To Renee he said, “He tried to feel me up.”

She laughed. “You sound like a girl,” she said, her voice like a screech, so loud to her.

“Renee, come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Hmm,” she said. She looked at pretty Lil sitting primly in her chair, taking another sip of her martini, nibbling on a green olive. “I think I’ll stay.”

“Renee, come on. I wanna get out of here. You’re too drunk, you’re gonna be sick. Let’s get you back to the hotel,” he said. “Let’s go, I’m serious. Something doesn’t feel right with these two,” he whispered in her ear. “How many drinks did you have?”

“Three? Four?”

“She had seven,” Lil said. “Seems like there’s already trouble in paradise if she’s drinking seven drinks and doesn’t even remember.”

“She would never have seven drinks. And why are you even counting? Seems like a weird thing to do,” Jamie said letting go of Renee just long enough for her climb off her chair and slide onto the emerald-tiled floor.

“Pish posh Jamie, let me stay. I’m having fun with my new best friend.” He could barely make out what she said. “I have to protect her,” she whispered to the ground.

“I’m going to go find you something to eat, some crackers or something. Is there a vending machine in here? A kitchen?” Lil pointed to the right. Renee watched Jamie’s back as he walked down what looked like an impossibly long hallway. He rounded a corner by yet another water fountain and disappeared.

“Wanna see my room?” Lil said. Renee nodded. Lil reached out her hands and helped Renee to her feet.

The room felt stuffy. The wallpaper was decorated in dark green banana leaves. Lots of plants and mini palm trees cluttered the room. Lil threw open the curtainless windows. Rain spilled onto the bed and the carpet. Renee shrieked, diving for shelter on the bed underneath the covers. Lil climbed under the covers too and began to kiss Renee. Renee moaned into Lil’s soft lips; she placed her hand on the back of Lil’s head.

Lil smelled like lilacs, and the sheets were delectably soft; Renee’s skin felt hot and rapid, like it was melting and moving, being poured into a mold. She opened her eyes for a second to find Lil’s closed. Was she kissing herself? She felt dizzy. Lil opened her eyes. Renee pulled away and stared at her. Just then the door swung open and Sam walked in, drenched, his blonde hair darkened and dripping onto the carpet.

“Where were you?” Renee asked, sliding off Lil and laying back down beside her in the bed.

“Way to make yourself at home,” Sam scoffed.

“Were you outside?” Renee said. “Why were you outside?” Her voice sounded faraway, not like hers at all. She reached for her voice and ended up falling off the bed, crashing onto the floor where she laid still, staring up at the smooth, beige ceiling.

“Just took a little walk.”

“It’s pouring out.”

“And you girls let the water flood the room. What were you thinking?” he said, shutting the windows. Lil rolled over in bed, curling around a clump of covers.

“We were just having some fun,” Lil said. Renee rolled over and threw up an asparagus-colored pile of vomit onto the carpet. “What should we do with her?” was the last thing she could clearly remember.

Renee woke up alone back in her and Jamie’s hotel room. Her dress was still on; she rubbed the heels of her fists into her eyes, crumbling what was left of her mascara. She groaned as what felt like an extension rod tried to expand inside her head between her temples. She rolled over and threw a pillow over her face to block out the light. The wind whistled through the objects in the room, the flower vases and the desk, the bathroom door and the nightstand.

Small flashes came back to her of the previous night, of standing at the top of the hill in the midst of all the fruit trees and bushes. Her feet, bare on the dirt path. Lil’s sharp, bright blonde hair fluttering. Sam’s hands on the small of their backs leading them somewhere. The valley beneath them was low and relentless, a whirlpool of darkness and brush, the wind roaring on all sides of them. And suddenly Jamie was there, screaming, or was she screaming? Or was it Lil who was screaming?

The door clicked open. Renee felt the weight of Jamie on the bed beside her. He wrenched the pillow from her hands and threw it off the bed. He turned her over onto her back so that she was facing up, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Hi,” he said. He took out his headphones and placed them on the bedside table. “How are you feeling?”

“Sick,” she managed. “What happened last night?” Her leg stung; she realized it was stuck to the sheet. She kicked off the duvet and peeled back the sheet to find her shin raw and bloodied.

“Oh, that,” Jamie said. “We’ll have to get you some bandages.” She sat up and vomited into the bin that was already placed beside the bed. She wiped the back of her mouth and slunk back with her head on another pillow.

“Really. Don’t. Feel. Well.” Jamie walked into the bathroom and came out with a cool washcloth he placed on Renee’s forehead. The room spun into a kaleidoscope. She thought of the banana leaf wallpaper, the rain making everything damp and mossy inside the hotel room, Lil’s fresh, floral smell, her lips, the mirror image of herself in Lil’s burning violet eyes, the beating of both their bright blonde hair whipping her face at the top of the hill, the screaming wind and the rush of the sea in the distance. Why had they stumbled out to the hill? Why had they left the hotel room in the first place?

“Do you remember anything from last night?” Jamie said. He held her hand. “Are you here? Earth to Renee?”

“What?”

“Do you?”

“I remember being at the top of the hill,” she said rolling onto her side away from Jamie. “I think I was trying to find my way back to our hotel. Last night was so strange. It was like I was with myself, but it wasn’t me, it was Lil. And I wasn’t myself, I stepped out of myself. I felt so freed, so slow too, though. Everything was slow. I thought I was drugged,” she said, smiling to herself. The smile slipped off her face. “I think I might have been drugged.” She looked down at her arm; bruises the color and size of dark purple grapes sprung up beneath her skin. Bruises. Shrapnel of the previous night’s events exploded behind her eyes.

Renee had watched as Sam glared down at Lil on the bed. His hands shook as though he were stopping himself from wringing her neck. He grabbed Renee by the wrist



and flung her from the floor to the bed so that she and Lil lay side by side. She could feel Lil's breath on her neck as she whispered, "Just do what he says."

Renee knew that she would not want to do whatever he was about to instruct, so she climbed over Lil, shaking her ankle free from Sam's hand that had flown out to catch her, and ran out the door. She raced through the lobby to the top of the hill. It had stopped raining, but a thin sheet of mist clung to the air. Renee couldn't make out the path down the hill. Sam and Lil were right behind her. Sam had grabbed Renee by the arm and was trying to bring her back to the hotel. And suddenly Jamie was there.

"Get your hands off her," he'd said. "Get your hands off her right now." And Renee remembered that Sam hadn't.

"There was an accident last night, Renee," he said.