

Little Nothings

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‘He who knows neither self nor enemy will fail
in every battle’

– Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

On the pale, slim road that winds down from the foothills of the mountain, there is a bright white figure of Jesus with his arms outstretched.

When I think of that summer, this is the image that first comes to mind: a bright white Jesus standing on the dry grass verge, too large to be part of a roadside shrine, too small to call a statue. Its strange size is unsettling, and intentionally so. The cliff edge is right there, beyond the car window, falling away to nothing but tree trunks that might break your back, and rocks to crush your skull. The figure is a warning to go carefully around the hairpin bends, to be sensible, judicious.

Yet, when I caught sight of it, the day we drove away from the ruins of the old town, it told me the exact opposite. You see, I had, moments before, been conspiring in the cool shade of an ancient fig tree and I was looking for reassurance, for encouragement. Then, there it was, with its arms aloft, as if ready to catch me.

I dare you, the figure seemed to say, *I dare you to fall*.

1.

We were on the slow minibus – Pete, Ivy and I – the one with the broken air-conditioning.

Airport transfers were allocated according to family surname, so the others, being at the front of the alphabet (Addison-Connors, Ebury, Gamage) took the first bus. We, the Travers family, were assigned to the second.

‘We should negotiate a swap with some of the other passengers,’ I told Pete, as we rolled our luggage along the shaded loading bays, ‘keep the group together.’

Pete – hot, bothered, his pale shirt already darkening at the armpits – said, ‘It’s a forty-five-minute journey, Liv, don’t make a scene.’

I took one of the single seats. Pete and Ivy occupied the double seat across the aisle. We crawled away from Corfu’s Kapodistrias airport, gazing out of our respective windows, past car-hire depots and supermarkets shimmering in the heat, past strip outlets selling, of all things, fur coats.

When the driver made his third, unscheduled stop early in the ride to fire rat-a-tat Greek at yet another someone he knew at a pavement bar, one of the passengers spoke up, a woman. She lacked the boldness to demand that the man stop yakking and get a fucking move on; instead, she meekly requested that the air-conditioning be turned up, just a little bit. This was when we were informed, in broken, unapologetic English, that the air-conditioning was out of order. We were all aboard a slow-rolling greenhouse.

I spread the pages of my passport and used it to fan my throat. Ivy – a small, aggrieved princess in a Minnie Mouse t-shirt – grumbled, already tired from the early flight. She refused Pete’s

offerings of water, shrinking back from the bottle, digging in her chin, just like she had as a baby in her highchair when offered a spoonful of puree she didn't like the look of.

'Hey, Spud, come on,' Pete coaxed, 'just a sip.'

The water was too warm, Ivy complained, pouting, sliding down in her seat, the bare skin of her thighs farting against the pleather. Her friends all had fridges with built-in water dispensers, she told him, not entirely apropos of nothing. That way, the water is always perfectly cold whenever you're ready to drink it.

'That must be nice,' Pete replied, patience incarnate. Ivy was the smart kind of nine-year-old; she knew what she was saying. I shot Pete an exasperated look, expecting a brief moment of collusion, but instead he pulled Ivy towards the questionable comfort of his hot, damp chest, and cocked his head at me. Wordlessly, Pete said it again: *Don't make a scene, Liv.*

I left him to his pandering and returned to the view – ordered rows of olive trees arcing across the brow of scrubby hills. We dropped down onto a coast road where cheap resorts spilt into the sea, littering the water with inflatables. Ahead of us, there were mountains.

When we finally stepped free from the bus, not the scheduled forty-five minutes later, but ninety, Pete's shirt was soaked through, stuck to his back. Ivy and I stood aside as he hefted and grunted, liberating our luggage from the back of the minibus. A brace of porters – local men, young, in crisp, white shorts and polo shirts, their skin conker-brown – dashed across the gravel to physically restrain Pete from this task.

'No, sir, absolutely not!'

They were to do the heavy lifting, they said, keep our suitcases safe; we were to go for a welcome drink, immediately.

A lush lawn sloped away from reception towards a poolside bar. The sweaty crotch of my jeans chafed as we headed over. I'd planned to change my clothes the moment we landed, but the queue for passport control had quickly become the bunfight of luggage reclaim and, before I knew it, we were being ushered onto a minibus. I might have excused myself then, found a hotel bathroom, but I had them in my sights – my girls, my gang, my oasis in the desert.

They were standing beneath the canopy shading the bar, drinks to their lips, the skirts of their dresses rippling in the lightest breeze. It took everything I had not to break into a run to be beside them.

‘You’re here!’ shrieked Beth on our approach.

The husbands clapped Pete on the shoulder.

‘All right, Speedy Gonzales!’

‘Got a bit of a sweat on there, have you, mate!’

They swallowed him up, steering him in the direction of cold, Greek beer. I reached down to push aside the gluey vines of hair that had stuck to Ivy’s cheeks and forehead, but she wrestled free. Showing none of my restraint, she ran full sprint to the others’ kids, her friends, sitting at the pool edge, their shoes off, feet dangling in the water. Ivy splashed and giggled, her minibus sulk vanishing instantly.

‘We were worried!’ Beth said, thrusting a glass of champagne into my hand. ‘We’ve been texting you!’

My phone was in my rucksack, switched off, nothing but a black block that occasionally took pictures since I’d gone pay-as-you-go and rarely paid-as-I-went.

Gulping at the drink, I shrugged. ‘I’ve got no signal.’

‘Just make sure you don’t join an Albanian network,’ Binnie said, champagne flute clutched close to her neck. She struck a forbidding note with the word ‘Albanian’, and I tensed at the prospect of where this might be going. ‘It’s only a couple of miles across the sea that way’ – she gestured vaguely – ‘but you’ll get stung for roaming charges.’

Binnie’s face had the kind of angles that meant she looked striking with little effort, but those same angles could also make her seem stiff, severe even, if you didn’t know her like we did. It was an effect she compounded by unfailingly wearing her hair scraped back in a ponytail, the finish on each side of her head mirror shiny. Beth and I, meanwhile, fussed about with fringes and bob cuts – anything to distract from the meagreness of our own facial features. Ange had taken this a step further and had extensions put in, beautiful, bouncy strands of honey-blonde, which swung across her shoulders onto mine as she clamped an arm around me, squeezing me tight to her bosom.

‘Just like you, Liv!’ she said, landing a gooey, lip-balm kiss on my cheek. ‘Always making a grand entrance!’

This wasn’t true, but I appreciated the comment, the suggested notoriety. The soothing effects of Beth and Binnie’s initial clucking and pecking, familiar as it was, had reached my nervous system – the alcohol too – and I felt my body loosen joint by joint within Ange’s embrace. I belched up my gulped-down bubbles.

‘Classy,’ said Ange.

‘I’ll fetch more drinks,’ said Beth, scuttling off, apologising her way to the bar.

‘So, where’s your dress?’ asked Binnie.

I winced in defeat. ‘Still in my rucksack.’

How smug I’d felt at Heathrow at six a.m. wearing English-weather clothes for the English leg of the trip, while the girls scuffed and shivered through Terminal 5 in flipflops and long kaftan dresses. Now I was basting myself in damp jeans and clammy trainers.

‘That reminds me,’ Ange said coyly, a finger poised at the corner of her mouth, ‘I have a little something in my bag for you for later.’

It knew what it was – t-shirts. I was sure of it. At Heathrow, airside, I saw Ange lean in to whisper to Beth when a group of hens passed by wearing matching pink tops bearing the slogan *Team Bride*. Pointedly, Ange and Beth had turned to me and grinned, complicit. She’s actually gone and done it, I thought, had t-shirts made – *The Only Way Is Up* across the front, *The Liv and Pete Comeback Tour* across the back. When Ange brought them out, I’d be obliged to put one on, pose for a group selfie, acknowledge the sweetness of the gesture, even though the printed slogan was a lie.

‘Cryptic,’ I replied before deflecting. ‘Ugh, let’s just get in that pool, shall we?’

Binnie’s hand twitched protectively to her sleek ponytail.

‘We can’t,’ Ange complained, with a teenage roll of the eyes. ‘We have to stay here for a welcome talk from the rep.’

‘Oh, man!’ I played along. ‘Really?’

‘You know, it might actually be useful,’ Binnie offered.

Ange pulled a face. ‘Okay, Mum.’

‘No, come on,’ said Binnie, embarking on a list of every useful thing we could learn from the rep – best restaurants, supermarket locations, kids’ club arrangements. But it was too late. Ange and I were nod-nod-nodding along, stroking our jaws, pantomiming our deep interest. It was a proper ganging-up.

‘Oh, piss off, you two,’ said Binnie, trying not to laugh.

Beth returned, thrusting a silver tray of drinks between us.

‘We made it,’ I said, raising a glass. ‘We’re here. Thank fuck.’

‘Thank fuck!’ the others chimed by way of a toast, saying it loud, drawing sideways glances from those around us. We sniggered, went quiet.

I looked down at our circle of feet on the patchwork paving. The girls’ colourful toenails were expertly manicured; mine were home-painted, still encased in bashed-up New Balance. As if sensing this small up-swell of despondency, Ange’s arm reached across to squeeze me tight again.

‘You are going to enjoy yourself, aren’t you?’ she said.

‘Of course!’ I replied. ‘Just look at this place!’

We were surrounded by luxury – absolute luxury, a virtual parody of it: neat white buildings, pineapple palms, striped parasols, fawning staff in monogrammed aprons. Modern jazz throbbed from the poolside speakers. Glasses clinked; laughter pealed. The lush lawn gave way to a raised sun deck where alliums craned their sparkler heads from flowerbeds that managed to appear wild, though were surely meticulously planned. Beneath the deck lay a private, pebbled cove, with a wooden jetty stretching out into the water, the planks just the right amount of crooked to feel characterful *and* safe. Beyond the boundaries of the hotel complex stretched the wide mouth of the bay, curtained by green hills, the ocean so still and vast it forced you to exhale. I had three weeks in this paradise, three weeks in the company of my girls, my gang, my oasis in the desert.

‘I’m going to enjoy it because I fucking well deserve to,’ I said, finishing my second drink with an emphatic swig, Ange nodding her righteous agreement.

It was as if both of us truly did believe it.



When I fell pregnant with Ivy, we moved out of London.

Pete's parents had divorced as soon as he left home for university, his dad settling down south, away from the family home in the Midlands. To be nearer his 'fancy piece' according to Pete's mum, though we never caught sight of this other woman, not in those early years. We did, on our weekend visits, get to know the leafy little commuter town Pete's dad had chosen as his new home. It was all clean cars and coffee shops, boutiques and bunting. The place had the artificial veneer of a living history museum or a preserved frontier town. It was ridiculous. But it was also the kind of place you envisaged bringing up your children.

Our friends were horrified. Why would we swap the fast-beating heart of London for the drowsy suburbs? The practical answer: with a baby on the way, we needed to move to a place where we could afford a second bedroom. The deeper truth: living at a Zone 2 address did not mean you were at the centre of things. Our friends were sneery about our decision because it implicated them too. They weren't ready to own it, the fact that none of us were cool anymore.

And when I say 'our friends', I should clarify that I mean *Pete's* friends. Another deeper truth that I had accepted long ago: I just wasn't friend material.

On my first day of school, I was shoved through the door of reception class by a mother who didn't want to hear anymore of my nonsense because of course the other children would be nice to me. I exited that same door at three-fifteen p.m. as anxious and friendless as I'd arrived. My parents suggested it wasn't in my DNA to be popular. Their intention was, I suppose, to make me

feel somehow better about my social failings, less responsible, but I do wonder if their saying that to me at such an impressionable age was what made it so.

And then, there was the invitation to Melissa Graveney's birthday party.

I was nine. Melissa lived in one of the proper houses across the road from our estate and she went to a different school (because her family had ideas about themselves, according to my parents). I wouldn't know anyone at the party – not even Melissa, not really – but my mother was insistent that I go. Invitations like that did not come along every day, especially for someone like me.

It was excruciating from the moment I walked in. Melissa's front room was alive with the expressionistic dance of wild-haired sprites, dressed in velvet waistcoats and bishop sleeves, speaking in vowels as round as the whole wide earth. I hid in a corner, charging a balloon with static on the cheap polyester of my Little Miss Chatterbox socks until the organised games began.

The first of these was Squeak, Piggy, Squeak, which I had never played before. I concentrated hard during the early rounds in order to grasp the rules – so hard that when it was my turn to stand in the middle of the circle, blindfolded, fumbling for a lap to sit on, demanding of my piggy victim that they squeak attempting to guess who they were from the timbre of their voice, I realised I had not memorised anybody's name.

At my school there was an abundance of Claires and Emmas. Here, the kids were called things like Skye and... I could only remember the name Skye. I offered it as my guess. Wrong. Lost for anything else to say, I offered it again.

'It's a boy, stupid,' Melissa informed me, and I leapt from my chosen lap, ripping away the blindfold, abandoning my turn because everyone knew you caught fleas from touching boys.

At the birthday tea, a goofy-toothed girl in a frilly blouse teased me for the way I had said Skye's name over and over. Then she tried to shove cake in my face. So, I bit her on the arm, hard enough to draw blood. My mother was summoned to collect me immediately.

‘I didn’t know the rules!’ I protested, trying to explain how my poor show in Squeak, Piggy, Squeak was at the root of this expulsion.

‘Next time,’ my mother fumed, dragging me back across the road, ‘just eat the fucking cake.’

At secondary school, I filled the time I should have spent hanging out in girl gangs in shopping centres by studying for an extra A-level – Spanish. Teamed with German and (my favourite) French, I believed this would equip me for a gap-year odyssey where I would meet outliers from every continent, people who would become my tried-and-true friends. But gap-year odysseys cost money, I discovered later, the kind that demands your parents have savings not terrifying debts. I went straight to university on a full maintenance grant, with maxed-out loans, loitering at the edges of various groups, invited along to this bar and that club, occasionally, but never as standard. I’d sit in the tiered seats of the lecture halls, watching the huddles of girls below me whispering to one another, writing in the margins of each other’s notepads, suffocating with laughter at what had passed between them, and I would think, *I wonder how that feels?*

I’d taunt myself by asking, *Is there still a chance to find it?*

Pete’s friends predicted that, once we crossed the M25 Rubicon, and as soon as Ivy was born (or ‘Spud’ as she was known in utero, a nickname that stuck and which Ivy hates, except when used by Pete), I would be instantly initiated into a band of clannish suburban mums. Pete’s friends also predicted for us a rambling mansion with a grand sweep of garden that would require a ride-on lawnmower, such were the house-buying spoils once you left Zone 6.

We bought a two-up-two-down off the high street, the front door opening directly into a living room not quite big enough to hold a full-sized sofa. The paved square of yard was overtaken by the numerous bins required for the complex recycling system. The instant friendship group I was forecast – another myth, based on the faulty assumption that every woman who grows another being inside of herself is alike, that all their pre-existing interests fall away after childbirth, so they can focus on one, unifying passion: babies.

I tried to join in. I ate every piece of fucking cake I was offered – metaphorically and literally. At coffee mornings, I jogged Ivy on my knee, smiling along to interminable conversations about sleeping patterns, feeding patterns, shitting patterns. I offered a woman a tissue at the end of a tearful monologue about how Mothercare had cruelly discontinued the nursery curtains that would have perfectly matched her baby’s cot bumper. One time, I asked a gathering of mothers at a playgroup if they had read the book that I was working through in hallucinatory chunks during night feeds – nothing grand, just some bookshop-table thriller. They met my question with violent stares. What was I trying to do, make them feel bad, these women who were too exhausted and overwhelmed to read anything more than the dosage on the back of a bottle of Calpol? I was, they informed me, just showing off.

Fuck them, I thought, and I started taking that book to playgroup, reading it ostentatiously, steering well clear of all the inane, one-note baby chatter. As Ivy clambered over the massive, plastic toys, the sort we had no room for in our two-up-two-down, I watched the tribes cluster – the blondes already back in their twenty-four-inch jeans; the earth-huggers in harem pants, newborns bandaged to their chests; the late-starter mums with the expensive handbags, intolerably fierce with everyone except their own terrorist children. And I saw this as confirmation of what I had always known – I would never ever find it.

On Tuesdays, I took Ivy to a singalong music class. For my sanity, every day required a timetabled reason to get dressed and leave the house. The location was an enormous church hall, of which we occupied one small corner, sitting cross-legged on the dusty floor. The surrounding unused space was intoxicating to Ivy, and no amount of cajoling or tambourine-banging would convince her to stay within the confines of our circle. She crawled, she rolled, she basked in that expanse of parquet, like a dog in a field full of fox droppings. And I – understanding how she felt – let her.

This enraged the class leader.

‘Can you please bring her back?’ she snapped, transforming from Truly Scrumptious to head of the Gestapo between the bars

of each song. I did as I was told – clambered to my feet, scooped up Ivy, dumped her back in position, only for her to squirm free again, giggling at this brilliant game of fetch.

Rage leached into the class leader's singing, into the ditties about bus wheels and bobbin-winding, and the mother beside me, to my left, tipped her head forward and began gently shaking. Knowing this crowd well, I presumed she was crying; music, however inane, had the knack of triggering a new mother's persistent undercurrent of depression.

But no, the woman was, beneath her mess of hair, sniggering – at Ivy, at me, at our absurd battle with the nursery rhyme *fürher*.

From my right came another snort, from a woman with a scraped-back ponytail.

I looked to each of them in turn, and as soon as we made eye contact, that was it, we were done for. All three of us were suffocating with laughter.

And, at last, I knew how it felt. Fucking wonderful, that's how.



I woke knotted in the sheets, naked but for a pair of knickers, my dry tongue fused to my teeth, the pillow bearing my portrait done in yesterday's make-up. I could hear Pete moving around next-door in the small lounge and kitchenette, where there was a fold-out sofa, big enough for a child. He was ushering Ivy into her jelly shoes.

'Where are you going?' I called, my voice emerging in splinters.
'Breakfast.'

'Wait!' I swung my legs off the bed and the room tilted, forcing me to grasp for the firm, horizontal reassurance of the nightstand. I blinked the cool, square floor tiles into focus. Pete was in the doorway, watching, quiet, stony-faced. I waited for the teasing. *Ahh, did poor ickle Livvie get attacked by the nasty wine monster?* It amused him to see me like this; it wasn't often that I let myself go.

'Was I a mess last night?' I asked.

This was usually where he comforted me. Our routine went like so: I would replay everything said and done the evening before, all the slights delivered unintentionally, all the secrets shared that I shouldn't have, all the people I had offended with my too-much behaviour, then Pete, as counsel for the defence, would dismiss the lot. I'd been fun, he'd confirm, everyone still liked me, and, really, had I actually been that drunk?

'Just sleep it off,' he said. The stony face remained. 'You can give me a lie-in tomorrow.'

'No, wait!' A moth of panic was fluttering in my throat. 'What did I do?'

'Not now,' he replied.

'Oh, god, are the girls cross with me?'

He sighed. 'I'm sure the girls think you're absolutely marvellous.'
'What's that supposed to mean?'

Ivy came to the door, threading her arm around Pete's thigh and slotting her thumb into her mouth, a thing she only did in our company, lest anyone accuse her of being a baby.

'Let's go, Spud,' said Pete, making a game of walking away with Ivy still hanging from his leg.

The door slammed shut behind them. I flopped back onto the bed. Beginning the first day of a holiday with a hangover was the worst kind of carelessness – like crashing your new car on the way home from the dealership. I was squandering luxury. The sun would feel like a punishment. Every request from Ivy – to tie back her hair, to get an ice cream, to blow up an inflatable – would come like a knife to the brain. I'd wallow if I wasn't too careful, give in to morbid thoughts of our life back home, boxed up in the back bedroom of Pete's dad's house.

I had to get up. I pulled on yesterday's t-shirt, which was right there on the floor, and seized the bottle of complimentary mineral water from the dresser. Cracking the seal on the patio doors, I stepped from our air-conditioned bedroom into the soft punch of early-morning heat.

The family in the adjacent apartment were out on their balcony – rough forms visible through the woven screen. A small child bobbed to a song playing tinnily from a handheld device. A male voice carried across, one half of a phone conversation: 'Yeah, we need to look at the business justification for a subscription model... Yeah... Yeah...' His wife flicked through a magazine and sighed, each turn of the page a snap, a protest against her husband making work calls on their holiday.

I slunk into the shade to slug my water. The view from two tiers up was quite something – the calm sea gently glimmering, paddleboarders dotting the expanse; it was thin consolation for being separated from the others. Apartments had, it seemed, like minibuses, been allocated according to surname. Beth, Binnie and Ange were all on the ground level, overlooking the lawns, their patios connecting. As a group, we'd migrated to that shared patio after the welcome talk, the evening before.

Our rep, a fifty-something Brit with a pebble-dash tan, delivered her well-rehearsed speech, and Ange and I muttered jokes throughout, finding innuendo in everything the woman said.

If water sports are your thing, you'll love it here.

This is a restaurant for those of you who like a bit of meat.

Binnie shushed us but we did not shush, and as a result, I remembered nothing of substance from the talk. Except for the bit about the snakes.

There are lots on the island, the rep had said, including one species of deadly viper. Not that we were to worry unduly; the viper was predominantly nocturnal, reclusive, and lived up in the hills. That said, earlier in the week, a hotel resident had reported seeing one by the rocks in the private cove.

Beth had yelped in response, a somewhat extreme reaction that had Ange and me snorting champagne out of our noses.

'Did you know about this?!' Beth demanded. 'Did you guys know that there were snakes here?!'

Collectively, we shrugged. Our unwillingness to join Beth in her state of terror was infuriating to her – and hilarious to us.

The rep sensed her audience's need for calm. These guests had surely seen a harmless snake, she said by way of reassurance, and mistaken it for a dangerous one. Still, a snake was a snake, and most of them would bite if stepped on, so she advised us not to go down to the cove in the dark when you couldn't see what was beneath your feet.

'But these creatures are much more frightened of us than we are of them,' she added. 'I've lived on the island for eight years now and I've not had a single snake in my garden.'

'Poor woman!' whispered Ange.

And that set us off again.

With the talk done, the free bar ended. Beth tasked Kenny with buying the first round of paid-for drinks, Kenny needing no encouragement. Beth's garrulous, loud-shirted husband was the lush of our group, the pusher. He bought a frightening amount of booze, lining it up on a table on the connecting patio, inviting us to admire his haul, this abstract sculpture he'd fashioned from liquid and glass. We swore we'd never get through it all, but I'm pretty sure we did.

Ange sent Jason to the supermarket in the bay for food, and Jason leapt on this hunter-gatherer mission, hamming it up, beating his chest, putting on a caveman voice and saying he would do anything for his ‘darling wifey’. He was being ironic; they were not married. Ange had turned down every one of his proposals. Marriage was outdated, she said, unnecessary, plus it was a total waste of money. Why, she wanted to know, did women invest so much time and emotion into a single day when the relationship was the thing?

Dev joined Jason on this trip to the supermarket – Binnie’s husband, a lean, poetical-looking chap, though he was nothing of the sort unless you got him onto the subject of cycling, which I was always careful not to – and the pair returned with packets of sausages, white bread rolls and Heinz tomato ketchup. I assumed they had tossed Ange’s shopping list into the sea and gone rogue, but no, the boys had done good. The food was chosen with the kids in mind apparently. After a long day of travelling, Ange reasoned, there was no way we’d get *taramasalata* and stuffed peppers past them without tantrums. It was a convenient piece of chicanery. Ange wanted the comfort of hot dogs for herself. This was what had stunned me and Pete the most when we’d been initiated into this moneyed little corner of the middle classes – their reliance on fish fingers, frozen pizzas and ready meals, the premium sort, but the kind of fodder us lower types were supposed to subsist on. The other thing that had surprised us: the distinct lack of bookshelves in their houses.

I looked at Pete and we had our brief moment of collusion at last.

‘Wall’s fucking sausages?’ he mouthed at me.

‘I know!’ I mouthed back, wide-eyed.

The boys had also bought, as per Ange’s instructions, a disposable barbecue for cooking the sausages, and Jason set about making fire with the help of eldest son, Duff. This was the kid’s genuine name, the one on his birth certificate. Jason laid claim to some distant Celtic heritage, which Ange had pounced upon when naming her three boys – Brady, Beacon and Duff. She was inordinately pleased with her name choices, but this boastfulness often conveyed an edge of doubt, of defensiveness maybe.

Jason and son created some impressive flames. Smoke plumed and we cheered their efforts, and this was what brought a flurry of chirruping hotel staff to our patio. The owner of the complex was soon on the scene too – a tall Greek man in expensive sports gear and sliders. He came marching across the lawn, swiping his arm through the air like an axe, issuing curses we didn't understand.

Those of us who were seated, rose to our feet. Ange stepped forward, fork raised.

'No!' yelled the owner. 'No barbecue!'

'Yes barbecue!' retaliated Ange, immediately on the front foot. How else were we supposed to cook enough sausages for eight adults and eight children? Surely not on the small hob in the apartment?

'Because, I mean,' Beth chipped in meekly, 'just think of the smell.'

The owner was appalled. Of course, the sausages (a word that seemed to contain infinitely more Ss in a Greek accent) should be cooked on the hob in the apartment – if, he added, disparagingly, sausages were what we felt we must eat right now. (Another exchange of looks between me and Pete.) What did we think the hob was there for in the first place? the owner persisted. And what did we think this place was, an exclusive aparthotel or a dirty campsite?

'We know it's an exclusive aparthotel,' Ange returned, 'because we are paying your exclusive prices.'

The owner was done with words. A waiter arrived at his side with a bucket of water and – translation not needed – was instructed to throw, whether Ange got out of the way or not.

'You just dare!' she cried, refusing to step aside.

That was when Jason took over, cranking up his estuary accent a few notches (an accent that sat well on him, though it was surely affected, he being the son of a wealthy Kent landowner). He grasped Ange by the shoulders and forcibly moved her away, before employing his geezerish, *alwight-alwight* patter to soothe the situation. He sympathised with the owner, admitting that we had, in hindsight, been thoughtless, starting a fire with dry shrubbery so close by. And, yes, we had not considered the feelings

of other residents and how the smoke might upset them. Jason poured the remainder of his bottle of Mythos beer onto the barbecue and the coals hissed to nothing.

The owner retreated, placated. Duff sighed, disappointed. Then Ange let loose, hollering her unspent anger into Jason's face. It was the kind of display we were used to. Ange and Jason were out and out fighters, never sulkers, no matter the company. In a sense, they were an unlikely couple – Jason so laidback, Ange such a woman of action – something I'd tried to explain to her directly, though I hadn't quite got across my meaning. Which was, that their differences were a good thing, they balanced each other out. Ange and Jason's arguing, the freedom and passion of it, was something I'd come to see as healthy in a relationship.

Their spat led to a division of the sexes – a 'boys' table' formed on one side of the patio, a 'girls' table' on the other. We sent the kids to bed on full stomachs of hot dogs cooked in the kitchenette in Binnie's room, neither Ange nor Beth being willing to put up with the after-smell of fried food. Ivy bedded down with Beth's eldest, Amelia, her closest friend in the gang, and we carried her up to our apartment later. Rather, Pete did. I presume.

The boys instantly forgot the barbecue drama. Their end of the patio was filled with laughter, mock-arguments, noisy posturing. A game started up that involved balancing an empty beer bottle on the bridge of the nose. Us girls, meanwhile, were compelled to keep returning to the altercation with the hotel owner, like cats drawn to the twitching of a dying bird.

'I'm sorry but I still can't get over how he spoke to me,' was Ange's refrain. The guy had no right, she said, he had disrespected her. Who did he think he was?

We agreed – he'd been rude. And we reassured – of course Ange would have extinguished the barbecue straightaway if only the owner had asked nicely. As the night darkened, as the drink flowed, our speeches of support grew more and more emphatic.

Close to midnight, the citronella candles lit, Binnie gave a sermon on Ange's courage under fire: 'I'm sorry but...' (This is how all our sentences began, though we weren't sorry, not in the least.) 'I'm sorry but you were so brave tonight, Ange.' She had

stood up to the man, Binnie said, slurring a little, her usual poise still there in the pauses. Because wasn't this one Greek man just like *all* men, with their intolerable need to order women around? Binnie raised a thin finger, signalling that she would delve into her legal training to deliver the final blow. And he was a particularly stupid man in this instance, because he had not realised, should he have gone through with his threat of throwing water over Ange, that it could technically have constituted assault.

Pete tuned into our conversation then. There was no need for me to look over; I could feel his attention.

Beth spoke next. 'I'm sorry but that man should be grateful we're here at all, at his *exclusive aparthotel*.' She looked to each of us in turn to receive a nod of agreement. 'Because isn't Greece actually fucked right now? I mean, don't they, like, need us? British people, I mean, British money. Far more than we need them, anyway. We could just go on holiday somewhere else, like Spain or wherever, somewhere more welcoming, if they're going to treat us like that.'

Pete, I knew, would be bristling at her words – *us* and *them*, the whiff of Brexit posturing. I was bristling too, but I understood that Beth was just shooting from the hip. Politics wasn't her thing, nor reading newspapers, none of that. Her opinions were all second-hand and roughly sketched; quickly retracted and apologised for, if challenged. I didn't challenge her because the content of her speech wasn't the point. This was what Pete could not grasp. He wasn't around our table. He wasn't close to the girls like I was. The moment was about supporting Ange. Binnie had said her piece, Beth too, then came my turn to prove myself. We were the daughters in *King Lear*, if you like, except 'love, and be silent' wasn't an option. I needed to offer something audacious.

'I'm sorry', I said, 'but why are we still talking about that fucking greaseball?'

The girls howled. *Greaseball!*

It was the perfect coda.

I turned to Pete, finding him exactly as I knew I would – staring, incredulous. *Greaseball?*

I picked up a discarded hot dog bun, tore off a chunk and forced the dryness of it down my throat. I called to Kenny over Pete's head.

'Hey, you're slacking here! Us ladies need more wine!'

But Pete's disapproving gaze didn't wane.

So, I got up to dance. '*C'est si bon*' was drifting across from the pool-bar speakers. Climbing barefoot onto the low wall that divided the shared patio from the sloping lawn, I stumbled a cha-cha-cha along the bricks, curling my arms through the air, singing tunelessly in the original French about the sweet nothings we exchange with the ones we love.

What? I shrugged when Pete refused to return my smile.

He gave a sorry shake of his head as if to ask, *Who are you?*

I stopped dancing, stood tall, hands on my hips. It was a good question; one I'd been scared to ask for months. If I had been close to his ear, maybe I would have, fortified by all that wine, put it to him. *And who the fuck are you, Pete Travers?*