

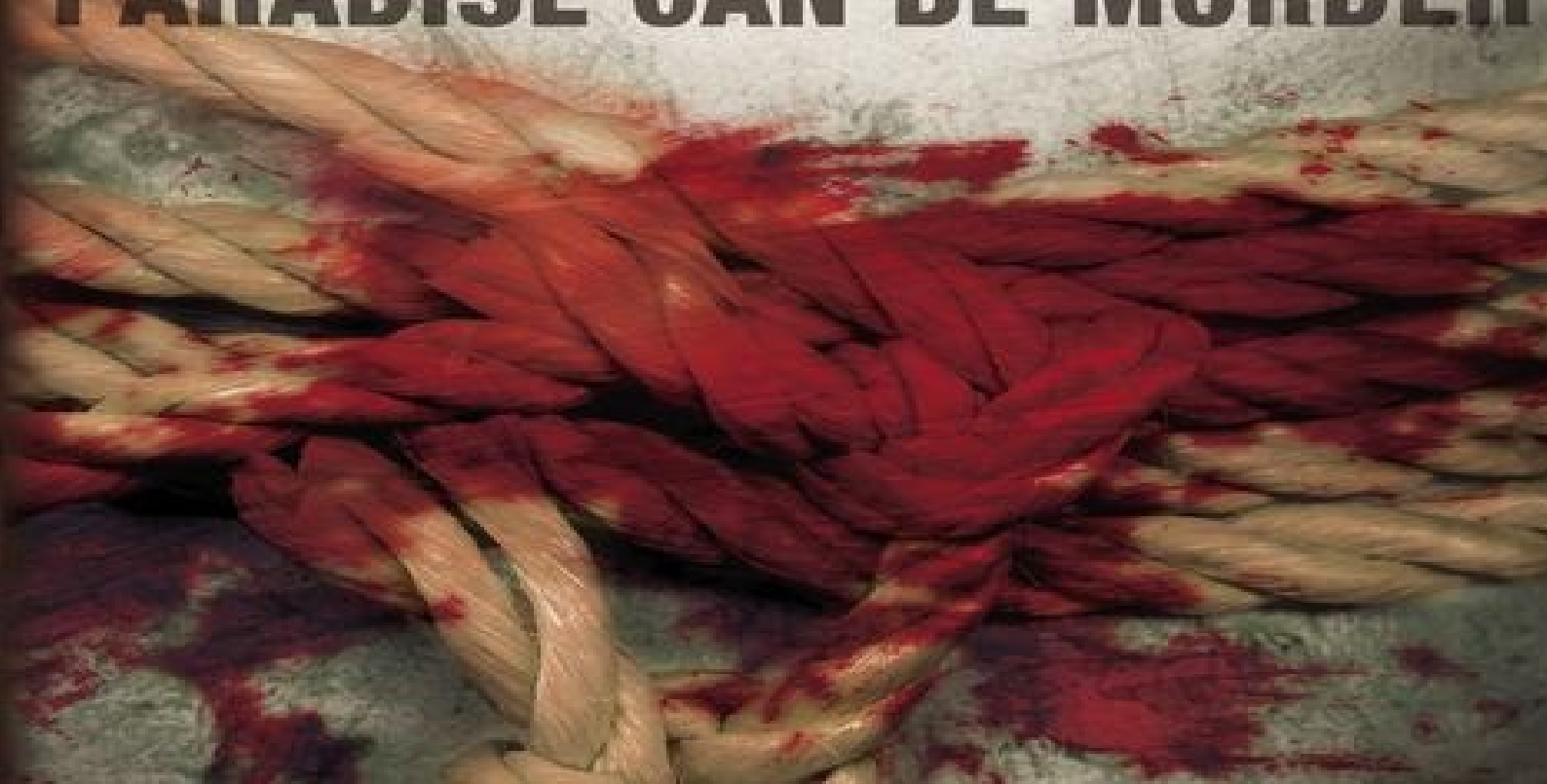
**STAV  
SHEREZ**

**THE**

**BLACK**

**MONASTERY**

**PARADISE CAN BE MURDER**



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STAV SHEREZ

# The Black Monastery



*faber and faber*

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For Dennis  
1976–2006

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Though there is a designation of priest/monk in the Greek Orthodox Church, I have used it to my own ends. Similarly, certain methods and procedures of both the Orthodox Church and the Greek Police force I have altered for the purposes of plot.

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*We read signs as promises*

Donald Barthelme

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By the same Author

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Two months earlier



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She wakes him with kisses. She wakes him with coffee. The slap of her feet against white tiles pulls him out of dreams and into this burning day. She's singing now. Her voice a beat behind the words like an echo from a distant station. She tries to keep up with the lyrics, but she stumbles, and it makes him want to take her into his arms and crush her against him until neither of them can breathe.

This is what he wakes up to every day. This is the sound of his wife making coffee and the smell of frying butter on a sun-sizzled morning. This is the taste in his mouth, left over from dreams; the sudden disorientation on waking, the not knowing who or where, the moment of panic – then relief, memory comes tumbling back. This is like every other morning except this morning it's his birthday.

He goes to the bathroom. Silently watches himself in the mirror. Every year seems to take more away, as if gravity was something you forgot how to fight after a while. He puts the razor to his throat and carefully shaves around the moustache. He trails his fingers through the dry bristle and tapers the ends. It's his one vanity, he knows, but it's a small one, and though he suspects the other officers make fun of him, well, it's a lot better than them making fun of his work or his wife.

She's hunched over the sink like a parenthesis. She contains his life. Her black hair rolling down her neck. Her arms sunk deep in the dishes, the kiss of glass against glass in the early morning silence.

She hums under her breath. Old songs he vaguely remembers from another time. She turns, her arms glistening with water and soap, foam clinging to her dress. 'I thought you were sleeping in?'

'Headache.' He doesn't need to say more. It's the shorthand they've developed over the long years, the way of saying things without saying them.

'You've always got a headache on your birthday. Oh, Nikki, maybe next year will be different, no.' He shrugs. It's his last year as a policeman. Back on the island again. Back where it all began. 'I had them before I joined.'

'Maybe it's birthdays you hate.' She places the glass of orange juice in front of him.

He stares at the bright liquid, the constellation of pulp fragments clinging to the side of the glass. 'It's just another day. I don't see why everyone makes such a fuss.' He strokes his moustache. She looks at him, all glare and frustration. She knows this is what he does when he doesn't want to talk about something. When his mind takes one of its frequent detours into the past.

The country she left behind so long ago still lays its claim on Nikos. In the melody to a song, in the smell of a campfire, in the red-soaked sunset on a certain November day he will be reminded, and the whole weight of years will collapse down upon him. It's best to leave him alone when he gets like this. She can only be another reminder.

He watches her clean the sink. The dishes are done and piled up high. The floor is swept, apart from a few spilled drops of orange juice. The town is quiet; only the sound of birds and cicadas, the pull and crash of the sea, wind fluttering the leaves. These are moments he wishes would last for ever. But there are fewer of them every year.

The smash of breaking glass rips him from his thoughts.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispers, ‘it just gave me a fright.’

~~He gets up, carefully navigating around the scattered slivers of glass, like teardrops, spotting the floor. ‘What did?’~~

But, before she can answer, he sees the cause of her fear.

He’s staring down into the sink. It is empty apart from two orange centipedes rising from the plughole. Their antennae twist and flicker in the air. They turn towards Nikos, and twitch. It’s this last movement that makes him step back. Murders, bodies and bruises he’s fine with. The crescent-shaped scar made by a dagger, the shadow of fingers on a broken neck – these are his day-to-day. But insect and crawling things he’s never been good with.

He stares at the shiny torsos, the twirling legs and black eyes. He watches as the centipedes crawl out of the drain and slither across the bottom of the sink, their legs like tiny hairs, black against the white porcelain.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it.’

He nods, aware of how neatly she phrases things. Not saying, I know you’re scared of them, I know how much they make you squirm. Just telling him it’ll be OK by the time he gets home.

‘God. They’re huge.’ He’s transfixed. As you only are by the things which scare you. He watches them scale the walls of the sink. Their movements so precise and efficient like strings of miniature soldiers.

‘Go,’ she says. ‘You’ve got a big day ahead of you, and I want you all fresh when you come back for dinner.’

He pulls his gaze away from the sink. He can still hear the scrape of their legs against the ceramic. They sound like a thousand tiny screams.

‘I thought we agreed, no surprises.’

‘Making you dinner is a surprise now?’ She smiles but doesn’t turn her head all the way towards him. She’s watching the centipedes. Her fingers tapping against her leg.

He kisses her lips. She pulls away, her breath heavy and dry, ‘Later,’ she says, placing her finger against his mouth like a full stop only he is meant to hear.

It takes him ten minutes to walk to the police station. It’s his favourite time of day. The tourists are asleep, the clubs and bars shut, the ferries still an hour away – it could almost be forty years ago. It could almost be the island he remembers.

He stops for coffee. He stops to chat to the old men in the taverna. They tell him stories about what their wives said to them the night before, the trouble their kids have got into, the antics of the crazy tourists. He sips his coffee and nods. It’s a small island, and he needs to be as much priest or councillor as policeman.

Then it’s a breakfast of *kourabides*. Those sugar-dusted cookies that his wife’s banned him from eating in the house. More for the mess they make than the damage they’ll do to his heart. They taste of his childhood, of his father going out on Sunday morning and coming back, a tower of white boxes from the bakery in his hands. She always knows when he’s been eating them. There’s sugar dust all over his clothes. His moustache is flecked white.

The street is quiet. The boats rock and tap each other in the current. He nods to the men walking their dogs and the fishermen sorting their catch. He looks up at the dazzling white villas hugging the western ridge, the sun breaking on their swimming pools and Japanese gardens. He’s fifty-five today but those houses are still as far away from him as they were forty years ago when he stared at them every morning on his way to school. It’s one of many things he’s learned to adjust to. He thinks of

secrets and dark years and wonders at the possibilities his life once held.

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The police station sits between the fish market and a shop that sells erotic Greek art to tourists. It used to be the smaller of the island's two churches but no one goes to church any more. The conversion was done quickly. There are corners dark with the ghosts of whispered confessions. Empty shadowed niches that once housed crumbling saints and martyrs. Fragments of frescoes still haunt certain walls. The smell of incense has never really gone away.

His secretary, Marianna, smiles when he enters. She's all lipstick and face powder. She's on the phone, nodding, chewing a pencil, checking her nails. Elias, his deputy, sits astride her desk. He's doing something with her computer, a cigarette poking through his thin grey lips. His other hand rests on her thigh.

'I'll tell him. Just stay where you are, please.' She swivels the chair towards Nikos. Elias' arm gets trapped between chair and table. His face flushes red. Nikos tries to bury his smile.

The secretary, pencil in mouth, passes over the note to Nikos.

'Just tell me,' he says.

'I know it's your birthday,' she replies, missing the way Nikos's forehead creases, 'but I think you'd better check this out.'

Elias is still moaning about his hand as they peel away from town. He's moaning about the heat, the long climb up to the ruins, the broken window on his police cruiser. Nikos lets him kvetch. These are Elias's last chances. In a few months, he'll be chief, and there won't be anyone to complain to. It's also a necessary distraction. A way for Nikos to stop thinking. To stop remembering.

He avoids the ruins if he can. He's never liked them. Not even as a child when every village boy would come up here at night, flasks and torchlight, fear and excitement, sleeping bags and cookies. But there's other history here too. A year ago and thirty-three years ago. Every bend of the mountain is a glimpse back into his younger self. Into things better left forgotten.

The old man is exactly where he said he would be. Nikos knows him from the market but he looks smaller today, as if what he had seen had somehow diminished him.

They can't make out what he's saying. His body shakes so much he looks as if he's out of focus. His words rush out tangled and twisted in their attempt to get to the punch line. But there's no punch line. There's only the old man's arm pointing towards the circle of rocks. The certainty in Nikos' blood. The knowledge of what they'll find.

Nikos leaves Elias with the old man. He wants to do this himself. He wants no distractions. He walks slowly. Each footstep bringing him that much nearer. He thinks about his wife's smile this morning. She's drifting away from him, he knows, but he can't find the way to bring her back. The sun burns his neck. Not yet nine, and already it's sizzling away.

The ruins stand before him. It's what people used to come to the island for. Now, they lie neglected and broken, unvisited and forgotten. Better that way, Nikos thinks, so much better.

There are stories and legends surrounding these woods, dark tales told to children on cold nights but Nikos has never believed them.

The stones reflect the sun back into his eyes. They seem white as bones in the morning light. Once they were the walls of an ancient temple. Providing cool and dark shelter from the weather. Privacy and isolation. Now they lie dotted and broken.

At the centre stands the altar. He can't see it from where he is but it's something he can never

forget.

The voices of Elias and the old man are almost inaudible. The birds have stopped singing. The wind has died. There is always such stillness and quiet at the ruins. It doesn't make him calm. It only makes him tense.

He sees the body from fifty feet away. Flashbacks spin, flicker and fade. He closes his eyes down hard. Opens them to dancing motes and shadow ghosts, but this is no illusion. This is the past coming back to haunt the present.

The boy lies on top of the altar. No amount of blinking or head-shaking will change that.

Nikos takes out his camera and reels off several shots. Concentrate on what's in front of you. The clues and traces. Forget everything else. Treat this as if it's the first crime scene you've ever come across. The camera shakes in his hand, and he takes several more shots to be sure.

The boy lies staked to the altar. His white skin reflects the sun as if it were made of marble. The altar is made of stone. There are carvings on it, but no one can say what they mean. Experts from Athens and the British Museum spent years trying to decode them but the islanders knew it was pointless. There's only one meaning to an altar.

Nikos scans the ground, the surrounding trees, anything to put off the moment he'll have to look down at the body. He stares up at the sky as if looking for an answer, but it is only the sky. He stopped believing in God a long time ago.

The altar is covered in orange markings, fresh and wet, daubed on the ancient stone. The skull of a cow lies on the ground next to it. Red ants and grey spiders crawl through the hatch-work of bone and tooth. Nikos's toes curl up inside his shoes. His breath turns short and shallow. The air feels raw against his skin.

He takes a deep breath. Waits until his heart slows down. Plants his feet deep into the soft earth beneath him. There's a trick to this, he knows. A way of cutting off everything but what's in front of you.

The boy lies on his back, eyes staring up into the empty sky. A ghastly mausoleum carved in living flesh. His arms and legs have been crudely tied to stakes in the ground. His skin is more red than white. The fingers on his hands are curled in tight against the palms. The nails, broken and bloody.

Centipedes surround the altar. Not the small, house centipedes he saw this morning but a larger, more ferocious variety. Their backs soak up the sun. Their legs susurrate in the still air. He swallows down his revulsion, the taste at the back of his throat he's learned to associate with irrational fear.

He recognises the boy. A local. Sixteen or seventeen years old. No one's reported him missing yet. It's the phone call he doesn't want to make. The voice on the other end of the line you don't want to hear. It's Elias's job in a few months' time, but now, this is all on him.

The rope binding the boy to the altar is thick and oily. The cuts on his abdomen are precise and professional. They traverse his stomach and groin. The stitching is jagged and rushed. The orange thread contrasting with the white skin.

Centipedes crawl across the boy's chest. Wriggle through the dark tangles of his hair. They snake out from under his limbs and between his feet. They seem to be coming from the body itself, as if death it's given life to them.

There is no blood on the altar. None on the ground directly around it. There are splashes of red on the surrounding stones. Whether they are accidental or not, he can't tell. They seem to describe a pattern, but they could just as well be random.

He takes more photos, feeling better with the barrier of the camera pressed up against his eye, as

this were something watched late at night on television. The camera clicks and whirs in the dry air.

Elias is shouting from the other side of the ruins, but Nikos can't hear him any more. He can't hear the buzzing of the flies or scratching of the centipedes. His ears are filled with screaming. Shriill and vibrant. Coming from the forest around him. From the rocks encircling. From deep inside his head.

He places his hand on the altar to steady himself. He leans down and stares at the boy's face.

But there's only the tangle of ligament and muscle. The staring eyes. The receded gums and skeleton teeth. The mess that skin hides.

He looks up, dizzy. The sky seems closer. He breathes deep and tries to regain his balance. Elias is shouting. The wind is howling. The cicadas buzz and roar. He looks back down at the boy's body, the mutilated skin and cracked bones, and he gets to his knees.

There's no mistake. No conjecture or speculation. There's only what's in front of him, and it's no less shocking because he's seen it before.

He could be looking at a photo from last year. The boy. The altar. The centipedes. Tremors run through his arms and legs. They'd got it wrong, as he knew they had. They'd thought it was over. Looking down at the ravaged corpse, Nikos knows this is only the beginning.



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## ONE

The rain made it easier. A stroke of luck on a night so dependent on it. It was the middle of summer but a thunderstorm crackled overhead, a muffled detonation poised above the city's roofs. The rain rendered him invisible.

He stood across the road, shrouded by an umbrella, pretending to talk on his phone but keeping his eyes on the doorway and the street ahead. There would only be one chance to get this right.

He let the first group go by. Their clothes were wrong, their hair, the way they held their bodies. He could never pass for one of them. So he waited, talking into the phone, making up stories no one would ever hear. It was the action, not the words, that was important.

They came out of a cab parked on the other side of the street. They were perfect. The denim jackets, slouched shoulders and messy hair. He watched them as they buckled against the wind and rain, unsheathed umbrellas and lit cigarettes. They were all smiles and chatter. Two or three drinks in and they were oblivious to all around them. He checked both sides of the road and made his move.

They didn't even notice as he crossed the street and fell in behind them. The wet pavement muffled his footsteps. The umbrella hid his face. He slowed when they slowed, then sped up as they climbed the marble stairs and approached the doorway. He could see the bright lights from inside and hear the spilled sound of laughter as it rushed out towards him.

This was the crucial moment. Everything depended on the next two minutes. His body shook. His mouth was dry. He'd never done anything like this before.

They stopped at the door. They fidgeted and searched pockets.

*They're looking for their invites. They can't get in without them.* A chorus of despair rattled through his head, but the men were only taking off their coats, stubbing cigarettes, straightening their ties.

He took a deep breath and closed the gap to only a few inches. He could hear them talking about football scores, smell the mix of aftershave and beer on their coats. He kept the phone to his ear and his eyes fixed straight ahead as he passed the sullen bouncer and gilded door frame, almost stumbling on the steps, nerves and panic fighting like two faded boxers inside him.

The lobby was brightly lit and thronged with people. His heart pounded like a train piston. The hand holding the phone was slicked with sweat. But he was in. That was all that mattered. That and the backpack which rested heavily on his shoulder. A reminder of why he was here.

He'd imagined this moment countless times since seeing the event advertised. But he'd imagined humiliation and shame. A hundred excuses for not having an invite. A room full of staring eyes. A quickly ushered exit. He'd never for one minute thought he'd be successful.

The crowd flowed through the club's lobby and into the main ballroom. He followed them, past portraits of greying lords on their last hunt, crumbling country houses and rows of dusty books with crimson covers. It was too hot in the room. His clothes stuck to his skin. The lights were too bright. His head was pounding. He could leave now. Save all the stress and hassle. The inevitable

disappointment too.

He could hear champagne bottles roaring, glasses crashing, folk music playing, people laughing and chatting, a white noise of repeated remarks and feigned surprises. He tuned it out. He wasn't here for that. He'd come for only one reason.

He scanned the room, looking for her.

He wasn't sure he'd even recognise her. He knew her only from photos.

At first, there was nothing. A blur of people, suits and haircuts, greetings and kisses, noise and chatter. Then he saw her. A flash of black hair, the angle of a cheekbone but, when she turned, the girl was much younger and didn't look like Kitty at all. His breathing returned to normal. His heartbeat began to slow. A voice in his head told him to leave before he made a fool of himself. But there were other voices too, saying the signs were right, that this was his best and only hope. He stood there and concentrated on his breathing. Slow and deep, like something you have to learn how to do. He was relieved he couldn't see her. It delayed the moment of action. There was plenty of time, and there would be a more propitious moment. It was all in the choosing. A wrong choice could damn a life. He'd made one before, he wasn't going to make another.

He walked over to the publicity table, and there she was. Black and white and seven foot tall. A blow-up of the photo used for her last novel. He stood there and stared at it. He knew every inch of the photo by heart but the magnification had caused certain things, previously occluded, to emerge. He noticed the chipped nail on her left hand, the smudge of lipstick on her bottom lip, an expression in her eyes he hadn't caught before. It was like looking at a totally different image. He wondered which of her three photos she would most resemble.

He was breathing too fast. He fought back a flutter of nerves. Tonight he would finally see her. The real Kitty Carson. Not the photo reflected back from a million paperbacks, their spines bent and broken on a beach in the midday heat. Not the face of a thousand Tube posters staring out into the sooty gloom. But Kitty as she was, stripped of flashlights, poses and Photoshopped edges.

A thread of hope wound through his body, detonating in his head. His excitement surprised him. He'd never felt this way before nor done such a thing; there were no rock stars or actresses on his wall – but he didn't think about it for long because there were things to do.

He scanned the table. Press releases and mock covers for *Holland Heart*, Kitty's new Lily Lombardi novel. He took the press release and carefully folded it before putting it into his pocket. It would make a nice addition ...

'Hey ... I know you, right?'

Jason spun around, startled. A girl was staring at him. Her hair was like a flame about to go out, the last blaze of blood before it's snuffed. Her eyes searched his face. He nodded, not recognising the girl, wondering if his cover was about to be blown. If she began asking who he worked for, why he was here ...

'That's it!' she smiled, all teeth and crinkled eyes, 'The gallery on Marylebone High Street. Didn't you used to run that? The one with the café?'

His heart crashed against his ribs. He thought of long days and unslept nights. The fires and winter floods. He wanted to lie, tell her she was wrong, but she seemed so sure of herself and so happy he had never remembered that he didn't want to disappoint her.

'A long time ago.'

She laughed. He thought perhaps she was attracted to him. Or maybe he was wrong, maybe she was just being polite. He could never tell with these things.

'What happened? I noticed it closed down a couple of years ago.'



He shrugged. His mind flashed back through those last months. The constant letters and bills, demands and buzzing of the door. A year of being afraid of the morning post.

‘I’m doing other things now.’ He tried to keep his voice steady and his eyes locked on the girl. ‘For a long time I thought it was who I was and then one day I knew it wasn’t.’

The girl nodded sympathetically, ‘I used to like going there. You never knew what would be on the walls.’

‘Thanks.’ It touched him that she would remember, that anyone would, something he’d tried so hard to forget.

‘Um ... would you like to join us?’ She placed her hand on his arm. It felt warm and familiar. ‘It’s about to begin.’ She pointed across the room to a table with two other girls sitting around it. Jason started to say no, thanks but I’m waiting for someone, when he spotted Kitty. She was sitting at a table adjacent to the one the girl was pointing to. She was smiling and sipping white wine. She looked nothing at all like her photos.

‘You’re a fan, I assume?’

Jason swivelled round. He’d been staring at Kitty. The redhead smiled. He realised she’d asked him a question.

‘Very much so.’

‘Who isn’t?’ The girl on her left said, and they all laughed.

‘We all work for her in one capacity or another. Ignore us.’ The third girl added.

They introduced themselves, and the redhead, Marissa, shuffled closer to him. Her skin smelled sweet and flowery. If he hadn’t come here for a purpose, he would have enjoyed talking to her, maybe swapped numbers, and, if he was lucky, she would call him and they would see a film together.

He angled his seat so he could see Kitty and Marissa at the same time. It seemed the best compromise. In the lulls of conversation he could hear the talk from Kitty’s table, her accent much more clipped than he’d imagined, her voice full and throaty like someone who smoked, though, of course, he knew she never smoked. The backpack was placed safely between his feet. The thing inside nestled against his left shin, a reassuring presence but also a reminder that he hadn’t achieved anything yet. Every minute it sat there felt like a tiny failure.

He looked across at Kitty and imagined his opening line, the way she’d be stand-offish at first and then something would pass between them, some shared recognition that lies beyond language. One day then could he give her the manuscript of his novel and she would remember him and start it later that night, calling him after finishing the last page, her voice husky and sleep-deprived, saying how she couldn’t go to bed, how she ... he crushed his hand into a fist. His eyes watered. He was back in the room. The girls were talking about some film he’d missed the name of. Kitty was sitting at her table sipping wine, less than five feet away. He leaned towards her table, concentrating until he could make out the words she was saying.

‘I’m so sick of all this.’ Kitty sighed, and Jason wondered whether she meant the champagne glass she was holding, the launch, or something else. There was a tremor in her voice, a touch of sombreness, the way some words slowed down almost as if hitting a wall. He hadn’t expected her voice to be like this at all.

‘It just feels so pointless these days. Most of the time, I don’t even want to turn on the computer. I’ve never felt like that before.’

He noticed it again. A ghost flicker across Kitty’s face. Something which looked very much like boredom when she thought no one was watching.

‘This one’s going to take you all the way.’ The man on her left, her agent, replied.

‘To where?’ Kitty asked, and the other two laughed but Jason didn’t think she was making a joke.

‘You’ll feel different after your holiday.’

‘Will I? I’m stuck on this new book. I shouldn’t even be going away.’

The agent turned towards her, and his eyes caught Jason’s. Jason quickly looked away. ‘That’s exactly why you need this. Unwind. Get out of the country for a few weeks. It was so daring of you to have just gone in there this morning and booked it.’

Kitty shrugged. She downed her drink and was immediately poured another.

‘The Greek Islands.’ The agent continued, caressing the words as if they were a swallow of ancient oak-casked Scotch. ‘Which one? Mykonos? Antiparos?’

‘Palassos,’ she replied, and something crept into her voice; something like hope, excitement? Jason took out his pen, unfolded the press release, kept listening.

‘The travel agent recommended it. It’s quiet, not too many nightclubs. Places for walking. I ... think it’s what I need. I feel so tangled these days.’

‘There’s always something magical about your first time in the Aegean.’

Kitty laughed, but Jason could tell she didn’t mean it. ‘I went as a student with some friends. We were doing Classics. We thought we were the first ones to discover Greece.’ She took a sip of wine and stared at the wall, ‘God, that seems a lifetime ago.’

‘You told Don yet?’

She shook her head, ‘I’m going to be missing his reunion gig.’

There was a silence in which everyone set about refilling their glasses or playing with the silverware.

‘When are you leaving?’

Kitty turned towards her agent, relieved at the change of topic. ‘Saturday. They booked me on a late afternoon flight, can you believe it? By the time I arrive it’ll be the middle of the night and I’ll have to find the hotel in the dark. You’d think they’d plan these things a bit better.’

‘So, what do you think about the film?’

It took Jason a few seconds to realise Marissa was talking to him. He didn’t know which film she meant. ‘It’s OK, nothing special.’

‘Nothing is these days.’

But his mind wasn’t on the conversation, or on the girls sitting across from him, but on what he had just heard. She was going away. If he didn’t do it now, he’d miss his chance. He stared up at the swirling ceiling and made his decision.

But not yet. A few drinks first.

He realised he wasn’t going to get her alone; she probably couldn’t remember the last time she was alone in a public place. He needed to bump into her in a corridor or lift. But there was no time for that now. He’d have to hand it to her in front of whoever was there, her agent, editor, the whole bunch of them.

He looked back down at his watch, no time for fantasy scenarios now. He told himself, ten minutes, then no matter who she’s talking to he’ll get up, walk over and ...

‘She’s halfway through the next one,’ the girl who worked with Kitty said in reply to a question he’d missed.

‘I heard there were problems,’ Marissa replied.

‘People love rumours, you know that.’ The girl tilted her head, ‘Believe me, this one’s going to be ...’

better than anything she's done before.'

'You know, I once sent her a draft of my novel.' It was the girl who hadn't said much up to now. Jason's heart rammmed his chest. His attention swooped back down to the table. 'Before I realised I wasn't a writer but an editor, that is. It was a pretty awful take-off of what Kitty was doing. I'm so embarrassed she'll link me up with that one day.'

'I wouldn't worry about it,' Kitty's secretary replied.

'Why's that?' It was the first unprompted thing he'd said all evening.

'Oh,' she smiled, 'she gets so many manuscripts every week. If she even bothered to read them, God knows how she'd have time to do her own work.'

'What does she do with them?' He tried to keep the emotion out of his voice, but he ended up sounding like someone with a speech impediment.

'She uses them to line her rabbit cages.' She looked at the girl who hadn't said much, 'Sorry Danielle.'

'That's OK, that's all it deserved anyway. I'm actually relieved she didn't read it.'

'Nothing personal. She doesn't read any of them. Maybe the rabbits do, who knows?'

The girls disappeared. The room fell away. He felt like people must feel in an earthquake; that first disorientating moment when the Earth shifts beneath your feet and you no longer know which way is up. He'd been so sure she would read it if he could only get it into her hands. He could still try and give it to her, but he couldn't bear the thought of her smile, her *thank you*, and the idea of his novel sitting at the bottom of a rabbit cage, being shit on and torn by small, sharp paws.

Fuck.

He couldn't understand what the girls were saying. He watched their lips move, their arms arc in a circle, but he couldn't hear anything. Only the blood pounding through his ears. The rat-a-tat rhythm of his heart. The clamour of everything promised and gone.

He excused himself from the table, said he felt unwell and got up. The bag felt like a weight on his back. He took one last look at Kitty and left.

He walked through Soho. The rain was gone, but the street shimmered with reflected neon and the strobing of traffic lights. He stared down at his feet as they splashed against the ground. People passed him, their arms heavy with shopping, their faces smiling and happy, a black mirror reflecting all he had lost. He thought of all the days leading up to this one. His plans and hopes and dreams.

When he'd seen the notice for the launch he'd known it was meant to be. That he'd been granted his last chance. Maybe if she read and liked the book, she'd pass it on to her agent. He'd spent three years trying to be a writer. He'd staked everything on it. He'd borrowed money, lost friends, mortgaged his flat. The money had allowed him to write the novel. The money was running out. Barely enough to survive out the month.

He hunched his shoulders against the wind. He walked for hours, crossing and recrossing familiar streets, one minute hoping he'd bump into her as she was about to get into a cab, the next kicking himself for such groundless hope. He knew where it would leave him. He'd blown his chance like so many times before. He'd waited for the perfect moment which never came, and he'd missed all the other possible moments.

He lit another cigarette and turned down Piccadilly. At the corner of Haymarket he stopped for a moment at a traffic light when something caught his eye. He crossed the street, drawn by the vista of blue and white, so clean and precise and different from everything around him in the London night.

He stood in front of the shop window. He stared at the poster. At the sun-blasted beach and

landscaped hills. The white monastery in the top left-hand corner. And if he looked really close, he could see two figures, their backs turned, hand in hand, walking along the beachfront under unfamiliar stars and, looking even closer, his face pressed up against the glass, he could make out the outline of Kitty's hair, her hand in his, the silence of an island evening, the feeling that there's no one else in the world but the two of you.

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## TWO

The cab dropped her off at the far end of the street, a winding foliated cul-de-sac hidden somewhere in Kew. As she got out she felt the pain in her chest. The telltale fist that closed around her heart. She took deep breaths. Palpitations rumbled, and she fought hard against the screaming voice inside her head. It was the panic and excitement, she knew. The strain of these past few hours. The dread of having to tell Don. The secret pleasure too.

How he would react to this, she didn't know. Well, maybe she did. She'd never done such a thing in six years of marriage, never been away without him, though he, of course, could be away for months at a time when his band sporadically reformed and toured.

She walked slowly up the street, the quiet houses winking with switched lights and family warmth. She sometimes thought they were the only house in the road without kids and Christmas trees. Other times she knew it was so.

She reached the gate and stood there for a moment staring at the thin yellow rivulet of light emanating from the living room.

He would rage.

She knew that. Expected it. Especially with the concert next week. The comeback he'd been waiting for. She'd promised she'd be there. Had she forgotten? No, the holiday just seemed more pressing. She would explain to him why she had to go, why when she saw the poster showing the mysterious hills, skull-like monastery and sun-blasted beach, it was like everything she ever wanted but never knew she did. He would get angry, storm out, not talk to her. The routine was familiar, she could go through it once more.

Her nose immediately wrinkled at the smell of cigarette smoke. She hated it when he smoked in the house. That's what the conservatory was for. She worried about how the smell would seep into the rugs and curtains. She could see thin tendrils of smoke creeping into the frames of pictures and yellowing the spines of her books.

She walked into the room, and there he was, on the sofa, wearing nothing but his puke-green Stratocaster, an overfilled ashtray keeping him company.

At that moment she both loved him fiercely and hated him furiously. And she hated herself for not being able to make up her mind. He was the one thing in her life she hadn't immediately been able to decide – bad for me or good for me? – and it worried her, that she couldn't have certainty, even in this.

She picked the ashtray off the sofa, upended it into the bin, then quickly wrapped the bin plastic around the ash so it wouldn't infuse the air. She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

'Hi,' he said, raising his head, which was as big as one of those Middle Eastern watermelons she saw in the grocery shops of Queensway. She loved his head, its stature and authority. It was like something off Mount Rushmore.

'How did it go?'

He never forgot to ask her about herself, and, even though she wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answer, she liked him for that, for taking the time, for realising small things mattered.

‘Good,’ she lied.

~~His eyes crinkled. She called it his mole look, but she’d never told him this. He put the guitar down. Frowned. Looked at her as if searching for someone he used to know.~~

‘Anything wrong?’ It was casual but it was also not so casual.

‘Why do you say that?’ She looked away from him. She hated how easily he could read her.

He laughed. ‘You want to tell me?’

‘The usual,’ she sighed. There were no secrets she could keep from him. ‘I’m just so tired of it.’ She sat down beside him but then noticed another ashtray. She got up, picked it off the floor, undid the plastic, scooped it and buried it. She noticed that several of the cigarette butts were much thinner than the Camels Don normally smoked. She wondered about that. Examined them, but there was no tell-tale lipstick smear. Maybe he’d had a friend round. Maybe it was just that.

She boiled the kettle, set his espresso machine to ‘on’ and tried to decide between the fourteen different types of herbal tea that loitered in her cupboards. She hadn’t drunk coffee for years.

‘Have you seen the news?’ Don said, taking the espresso and lighting a Camel at the same time. She scanned his face for any change but there was nothing she could see. She wondered when would be the best time to tell him. ‘You know I haven’t.’

‘There was a train crash in Bangladesh; two hundred dead.’

He liked pointing the worst things out to her. The horror and atrocity neatly framed by the black edges of the television screen. He loved programmes on Africa.

‘I really don’t want to know.’

‘No, of course not.’ He took a deep drag off the cigarette, and, as he exhaled, she could see the coiling snakes of smoke sneak up to blemish her books.

He turned the TV on. A woman was crying, trying to speak, but all that came out were sounds of unmediated language. The syntax of shock and disfigurement. Kitty looked away. ‘For God’s sake!’

He snorted, exhaling a precise amount of tobacco smoke.

‘Just turn it off, please. I’ve seen enough.’

‘Enough of what? You never watch the news, never pick up a paper. You’re so scared of confronting the world you’d rather make up your own world.’

‘Since when are you mister amateur fucking psychologist?’

He didn’t say anything to that. His head sagged, and his chin touched the top of his collarbone as he went back to the guitar. Kitty took a sip of her tea; it tasted like boiled water with some faint flavouring scraped from the pipes. She put it down.

‘I’m going to Greece.’ And there it was. Unloosed between them, landing with an almost palpable plop. Don looked at her as if waiting for the punch line to some obscure joke.

‘On Saturday. I need to get away.’ She wanted him to say something, to react. His silences scared her more than anything. ‘Did you hear me?’

He rubbed his chin. She noticed he’d shaved that morning, cut himself too.

‘That’s a great idea.’

It was so unexpected, it left her breathless. She was so stunned she didn’t know what to say. She knew how much the gig meant to him. ‘I have to go, Don, I really do.’

‘A holiday would do you good.’

She wanted an argument. The Don she knew. ‘Is there something wrong?’ She looked at him. Wanted him to say, *please stay*, even though she knew she wouldn’t.

‘Why would anything be wrong?’ He got up. ‘You’re always thinking the worst, Kitty. Sure, it would have been nice for you to come ...’

‘Like you were there for me tonight?’ She couldn’t resist it, and if she’d thought about it she would have held back, but now that it was out she was pleased. ‘You never come to my events. Not once in the past five years, and yet you expect me to come to every little gig you play.’ She felt good saying Good and bad. Good for herself but bad for them. It was the conversation that hovered over the edge of their marriage, from that day in the emergency room until now.

‘You don’t need me,’ he replied, still barely raising his head from the guitar. ‘You’re famous. Everybody loves you. Your books sell to countries I’ve never even heard of.’

‘That’s not the point.’ She was amazed at how little he really knew her and how long it had taken her to realise this.

She climbed the stairs, past their bedroom, the radio sending out wisps of melody and static, and around the corner, through the extension and into the white room. She knew Don wouldn’t follow her there. He hadn’t been inside for five years. ‘It’s just plain morbid,’ he’d told her. ‘It’s an excuse for you to not let go,’ he’d added when that hadn’t worked. But here she was.

She sat on the floor, feeling its cold prickle against her legs. There was no furniture. There was nothing but the room and her thoughts. The one uncluttered space in her life.

They’d painted the room during her sixth month. It would be perfect for a nursery they both knew the first time they saw it. The window overlooking the park. The quiet and high ceilings. The comforting sense of proportion.

A couple of months after it happened, a moving company had come and taken the cot, the mobile of spinning dogs, the blankets and the playpen. Now it was just a room.

It had taken her fourteen months to step over its threshold again. She’d often opened the door and stood staring across the border, watching the trees change colour through the window. And then, one day, she stepped in. And found that the place she’d so feared was now the only place she could find respite. Don wouldn’t come in. The room was far away from the pull of the ringing phone. It was a room without memory, without a present or future.

She stared at the walls and thought about her trip. She could see the small island, the sleepy bay and rustic shops, the long walks she would take through the forested hills, the silence and peace and beauty of it all. She willed the sea and shoreline until it rippled against the white wall. Until she felt she was coming back to herself again.

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### THREE

They blamed it on a drifter. One of the many who surfed through the Greek Islands on a search for women and prolonged ecstasy in the summer months. He fitted the profile. He was already what everyone expected him to be.

It was over almost before it began. The newspapers had their front pages. The island got back its nights of unbroken sleep. The companies began booking tourists again. Another murder successfully solved. Nikos had arrived a few months after the arrest. It was all over by then, the island returned to its normal self.

Now he's on the promontory again. Standing in the circle of ruins again. Staring down at a body again.

Two months before, it had been a local boy. Two months before, it had been the start of the season. Now there was no doubt. Now they would have to eat their words.

The girl lies staked to the altar. It is exactly the same as before. And before that.

Last year, before he came back to the island, they found a tourist girl and then, a month later, a local boy. This year it's the other way around, but in all other respects it's the same. The centipede. The carvings. The body torn and stitched. The faceless skull staring up into a yawning sky.

He knows it's wrong to feel like this. To stare down at the body of a young girl and be thankful the killer's resurfaced. But it provides him an opportunity. A way of settling obscure debts and uneasy years. He's been given another chance, he knows, and the fact this girl had to pay for it with her life only makes him more determined.

\* \* \*

'Same as the last one.'

'You're certain?'

The coroner turns away from the teenager's body. He shrugs. 'What? It doesn't look the same to you?'

They're in an annex of the police station. A temporary morgue on loan from the fish market. Plenty of ice and long, flat tables. The stink of fish guts and blood mixes with the corpse smell. That sweet and sickly delicacy which will take days to leave Nikos's nostrils.

'I know it looks the same, but is it the same?' He strokes his moustache. The smell of stale cigarettes rises from his fingers. It's better than the smell of the room.

'Nothing is exactly the same.' The coroner sighs, tired and worn out from a night at the table.

Nikos checks his frustration. Breathes out slow. 'Would you say it was the work of the same person then?'

The coroner looks back down at the body of the girl as if to remind himself, but his findings are etched as deep into his brain as they are on the strip of tape wherein he records them. 'Absolutely,' he says. 'Unless, of course, it's a copycat. Someone who knew the details of the previous murders.'



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