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Can We Still Be Friends

Written by Alexandra Shulman

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Can We Still Be Friends

ALEXANDRA SHULMAN



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For my mother
Drusilla

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1983

1

The terrace – if you could call the concrete slab with its two white plastic chairs a terrace – looked down on the small Kanariki beach. Kendra leant over the black iron rails and rubbed her leg, vaguely exploring whether her newly acquired suntan might flake off into dried skin, as she watched the families below, laden with the cumbersome paraphernalia of small children, pick their way slowly down the path on to the rocks and stones. The sun was already high, sparking light off the calm Ionian sea that lapped gently where the stones met the water.

'What happened to the long university holidays?' she asked herself, entering the room she was sharing with Sal. The floor was strewn with clothes and, with the shutters closed, the room was dark, pierced only by one bright shaft of sun from the terrace door. She heard the rustle of Sal's sleeping form turning under her thin sheet. Rummaging around for a dry bikini, Kendra was torn between making an exaggerated amount of noise to wake her friend to share the precious hours of this last day and the alternative of acknowledging that it was Sal's last opportunity to lie in.

'What time is it?' Sal's slow voice emerged, and Kendra heard the near-simultaneous click of a lighter and an inhalation. Sal's smoking had been driving her crazy all holiday so there was no point in making a fuss about it at this late stage; nonetheless, irritation infused her voice, clipping her words.

'About 10.30, I guess. I'm going down to the beach.'

'See you there,' answered Sal, now propped up against the whitewashed wall, her small bare breasts white against the tan of her arms and torso. 'Last day and all. Musn't waste it, must we?' She smiled, her eyes still closed against the light as she blew a thin stream of smoke into the air above the bed.

The holiday had been Sal's idea. Her eye had been drawn to a small ad in the newspaper: 'Big Discount. Traditional Greek village studio on beautiful beach – two weeks only.' 'Come on, Kendra,' she had urged, telephoning immediately. 'It's a bargain, and you haven't moved from London since we left university. Girls only. Catch the rays. I've found the flights. Annie can do one week, but she can't get any more time off work.'

Annie and Sal were Kendra's closest friends, yet her reaction to Sal's enthusiastic proposal, as ever, was a certainty that she didn't really want to participate in whatever activity was being suggested, rivalled by a niggling suspicion that this reaction showed her in a negative light. Sal would, of course, be suggesting something that would make life more interesting, more vivid. Over the four years since they had first met on their shared university corridor Kendra had become well acquainted with this feeling of inadequacy rippled with apprehension. Crashing a party hundreds of miles away, hitching to the sea at midnight, experimenting with a new drug – for Sal, it was all in her sights, up for grabs; for Kendra, it was all a potential source of anxiety and trepidation. Annie was often able to straddle the extremes of the two friends with her gentle determination, but experience had taught them both that, although it was, in Sal's words, 'narrow-minded', 'so unadventurous', to say no to some of Sal's wild plans, to say yes would often end in a medley of chaos, and the ramifications would stretch far and take a lot of undoing.

Corfu, though. Only a short charter flight away. And Sal was right, Kendra had been precisely nowhere in the last year.

Having been deposited at Corfu airport at three o'clock in the morning, the girls lay on the hard floor of Arrivals until daybreak, when a taxi took them out along the winding roads towards the north-eastern end of the island. Tiredness had reduced them to companionable silence for most of the journey.

'Hey! Look, down there. Fantastic!' Sal spotted the beach at the bottom of the slope as the taxi bumped towards the water.

A woman in a pair of unbecoming white shorts stood outside the

small taverna on the beach. The black folder she held and her bored demeanour gave her away as the holiday rep.

'Sal Turner?' she queried as the three disembarked with their bags.

Sal stepped forward, smiling.

'You're in Villa Ariadne. Follow me.' The rep led the way back up the road; the girls stared after the dingy white bra straps sliding down her shoulders, and followed her stolid figure, lugging their suitcases like mules. Soon they turned on to a narrow path, on which stood a square whitewashed building, its dark-green shutters closed. Outside climbed a staircase, to a room with four narrow beds, and a kitchenette in one corner.

'The plumbing's a bit temperamental in this one, so go easy on the toilet paper and, on no account, put *anything else* down there, or I can't be held responsible,' the rep recited.

Annie opened the shutters to the balcony, taking in the bright sun and the crystalline sea. Why were the first moments of her holiday being tarnished with a conversation about lavatories? She only had a week.

'Of course. Thanks.' She took the room key from the rep as Sal signed for it.

'I'm Amanda. You can find me at Villa Serafina, outside Kassiopi, if you need me in an emergency. All breakages will come off the deposit.' And, with that, she left.

Annie opened the low cupboards under the sink at the dark end of the room.

'I don't think we'll be doing much cooking here,' she muttered. Sal and Kendra glanced at each other. 'I know you two can't cook, or won't, but Mum lent me her Elizabeth David and I thought I might do something. Like mayonnaise. Real mayonnaise is so delicious. You know, with local olive oil –'

Sal was already flinging the contents of her case around in a hunt for her bikini. 'Come on,' she said. 'Let's leave the mayo for a bit. I'm on for a beer. What's the Greek for beer? I'm baking already.'

From then, their days followed the same pattern: hours lying on

the large stone slabs that rose from the pebbles of the beach, interspersed with forays to the taverna. Occasionally they would trek up the hill and over to another hamlet, but an unspoken agreement had determined that this was a no-action holiday, a time when they could indulge in each other's company day and night. 'No pulling, I guess' was how Sal had wrapped it up.

They had never shared a house while at university, although they had become the best of friends, plaited in an intricate weave of shared experiences. After the first year on campus they had found separate lodgings. Annie rented a room in a mouse-infested house in the local town with a couple of her fellow history of art students, Kendra shared with an itinerant population of students and Australians on working visas, and Sal – well, Sal floated from place to place, finding a bed with friends and a constant stream of extremely short-term lovers. She liked to say that she 'surfed the wave of spontaneity' and, on the occasions when the wave crashed and she was left stranded, she had always been able to find space with one of the others.

Each of the girls realized that their friendship was preserved by this distance. The intensity of their engagement with every aspect of each other's lives was given some respite by their not living together. Of course when they did discuss the prospect of sharing a home they all vowed that it would be a wonderful thing to do.

There had been an afternoon just after finals when a large pack of that year's students had headed up on to the downs to party into the night. In the clear, brilliant light that came straight off the south coast some distance away, they set up an encampment, lying on blankets, listening to a medley of music on a bulky cassette player. Sal, wearing denim cut-off shorts and a vest, sat on the long grass rolling a joint on her lap while Kendra paced, a bulky Nikon camera slung across her neck, taking photographs of the group. Annie unpacked French loaves, bags of cherries and crisps, packets of tomatoes and triangles of Dairylea.

As the sun faded slowly into the rose-tinged light of the evening,

the group lay in a tangle of denim and bare legs. The three girls wove daisy chains around each other's wrists, slicing the thin stalks with their fingernails and pledging that, one day, they would all live together.

'As soon as I've got some cash, I'm going to look out for somewhere for us. It'll be brilliant,' enthused Sal, drawing on the heady smoke and passing the joint to Annie.

'We'll be the Three Graces,' Annie offered, and lay back looking at a vapour trail in the clear sky. Kendra handed over her precious Nikon to a bespectacled boy in a Sandinista-sloganed T-shirt.

'Tony – take a picture of us. Here. The aperture needs to be open in this light. Are you sober enough to focus? We should capture this moment. Remember it when we're old and grey.'

Kendra and Annie sat on the grass, smiling gently, blearily, into the lens, Sal leaning behind and into them, her arms around their shoulders. From the cassette player the sound of John Lennon's 'Woman' wafted into the air. They heard the click of the pictures being taken, one after another. Sal stood up, swaying a little. 'We should make a toast – to us. Together for ever. Sisters under the skin. All that stuff. Shall we make a blood bond?' She picked up the large knife that had been used to cut the bread.

'Don't be crazy, Sal,' said Annie. 'The daisy chains will do. We don't need to carve ourselves up to know we love each other.'

Pulling her sarong tightly around the lower half of her body, Sal walked over the stones to where Kendra was lying in sphinx pose on a scarlet towel reading a thick paperback.

'Watch the back of your legs – just this bit here, you're starting to burn,' said Sal, gently touching the skin on the top of Kendra's thighs. 'Do you want a coffee? I'm going to order one.'

Kendra jumped up awkwardly, pulling her untied bikini top over her full breasts and narrow back. With her tangle of tawny hair, her height and her generous figure, she was a golden Amazon, in contrast to the small, lean proportions of Sal.

'I think we should go into town for our last night. We've been loyal to Vassily and his kalamari and moussaka, but we've got to hit the big city lights tonight – or at least go to Kassiopi,' mooted Sal as they strolled over to the taverna.

Kendra realized that, although she had no desire to leave the hamlet, where the fishing boats came in at night to deliver their haul of mullet, squid and octopus to Vassily and his son, especially the night before the inevitably tiresome experience of a charter flight home, there was absolutely no point voicing this.

'Let's go in early, watch the sun go down from there and get something to eat. That way we won't be back too late,' she offered, hoping that this would satisfy Sal's appetite for action.

They sat at the table they had now come to regard as *their* table, and ordered gritty coffees, spooning thick honey into bowls of creamy yoghurt.

'You know, when we get back I really need to get a real job,' mused Sal. 'I'm getting cash for shifts working on that diary page in the newspaper, but I can't even guarantee the rent for a room somewhere. Funny, isn't it, how it's Annie who's got the good job?' replied Kendra, narrowing her eyes and looking out over the bay to the cypress- and gorse-clad hills opposite, which were veiled in a blue, gauzy light from the heat of the sun. 'Well, she's always been the practical one. I couldn't face Terrible Tania and her tribe, but Annie doesn't really care, does she? She's not looking for a career. She's just passing time, waiting for her dream man.' She rolled the paper packets of sugar in a bowl on the table around in her fingers, enjoying the crunching sound of the grains. The thought of Annie's last boyfriend, a rugby player with thighs instead of brains, asserted itself: 'And we've certainly been through enough Mr Wrongs on the way . . . Anyway, I might investigate this Chapel place I've heard about,' Kendra continued. 'It sounds like it could be interesting, it's a kind of community centre. I just . . . I don't know . . . I feel I want to do something useful. Sounds wanky, I know.'

Hanging in the air was the shared knowledge that it was Kendra

who was the more financially secure of the three, allowing her, Sal thought in her more uncharitable moments, to get involved in a load of goody-goody stuff. She remembered her first visit to Kendra's home in west London. It was a huge house, with white walls dominated by large abstract canvases, parquet floors and tubular steel and leather furniture. Kendra's mother, Marisa, was the least motherly person Sal had ever encountered. Extraordinarily tall, with the long pale face of a Modigliani, she wore her black hair scraped back, her full mouth outlined in a dark beige and dressed entirely in black.

'Ah, Sal, we meet, finally,' she had said. 'I can't stay and talk . . . But, darling, you know we are giving a dinner for Philip Roth tonight. You both might like to join us.' Her voice was slow, a languid New England drawl. 'I gather from Kendra that you are reading English and American literature – you would be interested in meeting him, I am sure. Any time after nine. And, Kendra: *tenue de ville.*' She drew out the word '*ville*' so that it sounded like 'veal', and with it left the room, and the two girls, standing in what Sal felt to be the emptiest space she had ever been in. She looked at her friend. 'She means look smart,' shrugged Kendra in explanation.

That had been early on in their university days and, as the terms passed, it emerged that Sal was one of the few people Kendra had allowed a glimpse of her family. It was not clear whether Kendra was embarrassed by the cool, moneyed chic of her circumstances or despised it, but her background was determinedly disguised. She lived on pulses blended into soups and curries, walked or cycled everywhere and adopted a simple uniform of loose shirts, jeans, combat pants or the occasional long skirt, ensuring her legs were never bare. Her hair was often tied up in a turban of raggedly dyed scarves. Sal, who liked to show off her lithe frame in body-hugging shapes – boob tubes, leggings, clinging jersey dresses – would tease Kendra fondly about her dress sense but, despite the differences, their loyalties ran deep, each discovering in the other missing aspects of their own personality.

University represented different freedoms for them. Sal's yearning to escape the gentility of the quiet Cheltenham townhouse of her childhood had propelled her into achieving first-class exam results as an escape route. When the day of departure finally arrived, she left the bedroom where she had slept all her life torn apart like empty packaging. In her urgency to be off, she didn't notice her mother glance at the wooden-framed photograph she left behind on the chest of drawers, of her parents with her and her brother as small children huddled beside a cotton windbreak on a beach. She felt no sadness as she closed the door and hauled her large suitcase down the narrow staircase, just the energy of anticipation.

Her mother had gathered cardboard boxes packed with an electric kettle, two mugs, a box of Duralex tumblers and a stack of Tupperware containers on the Formica-topped kitchen table.

'Joy, we should be leaving shortly,' her father, Maurice, shouted as he walked into the room, stooping through the door, glasses balanced on the balding dome of his head. 'Salome, are you ready? I don't want to be too late back, as I have a lecture to prepare for the morning.'

Her mother sat in the front seat of the ancient Vauxhall, and Sal was wedged in the back between her suitcase and bundles of bedding. It had been a golden early-autumn day, and the Cotswold stone villages they drove through on their journey were at their picture-postcard best. As her parents listened to Radio 4, exchanging the odd comment, Sal felt the coil of impatience tighten in her; she was eager to colonize a new world.

By mid-afternoon, Sal was alone in her small campus bedroom. 'Call us soon' were her mother's last words before she and her husband departed along the dingy green internal corridor. Sal sensed the loss her mother was feeling at her daughter leaving home, her clipped tones bright but her eyes somewhat dimmer. She hid her guilt at not feeling one jot of sadness by brusquely urging them to leave. 'You should go now. Dad, you won't get that lecture done if you hang around here. I'm fine.' She stood on her

toes to kiss him briefly on the cheek before giving her mother a forced hug.

Unpacking was far too dull an option for the first afternoon at university, and she wandered out of her room, looking into the shared kitchen at the end of the corridor. A boy was seated at the table, his mother handing him a mug, 'Now you will remember to fill the kettle before you switch it on, won't you, Dave? Dave, are you listening?' Sal turned away and walked straight into a tall girl dragging a soft bag that had split open.

'Sorry,' she murmured, moving away, but then turned back to look at the stranger, who was now bending to stuff back in the clothes that were escaping.

'Here you are,' said Sal, handing her a T-shirt that was lying on the speckled linoleum.

'Thanks. This bag split as soon as I got off the train. I'm Kendra.'

'Sal . . . I'll help. My parents drove me. I couldn't stop them. Did yours come with you?'

'No. They're abroad.' Sal heard a trace of an American accent in Kendra's slow tones as they walked past the identical doors that lined the corridor. 'I think this is my room.' Together they lifted the broken bag and dumped it heavily on a narrow, single bed only fractionally larger than it.

'Let's go and explore. Leave the unpacking till later,' suggested Sal. That had been four years ago, but that first meeting had set the tone for their relationship, Sal urging exploration and activity, Kendra a compliant, supportive companion.

For the rest of their last afternoon on the island the girls basked on the rocks like contented seals, watching their tans deepen, feeling the salt dry on their skins. By six o'clock, the small hamlet on the opposite side of the bay had come into clear view as the light changed and the sun moved behind the hill. The beach was emptying of noisy families.

It was Kendra's favourite time of day there, when she was able to lie still and hear the noise of the water, spared the continuous

chatter and shrieks of the beach's other inhabitants. She stood up and waded in, slowly feeling her way on the large flat stones underneath. Once the water was waist deep, she flung herself in, swimming with deep, strong strokes, out past the two anchored fishing boats beyond sight of the bay, her long hair glued to her back in rat's tails. Then she stopped to tread water and look back, to Sal in her emerald bikini, now an almost indecipherable dot. Ahead of her stretched the darkening sea, to the horizon.

'It's lovely up here in the late afternoon,' Joanna Mitchell announced as she and Annie clambered up the stepladder in the small hallway and through a trapdoor on to the decked roof terrace. From the steps below, Annie watched Joanna's sheer nude tights and tight red skirt fill the space between the ceiling and the sky. 'All I ask is that you don't let the plants die – you can run a hose from the bathroom tap. See. Here is the end you shove through the window,' said Joanna, leaning precariously over the small parapet.

One for Sal, thought Annie, then instantly corrected her assumption – or Kendra. Not her, at any rate.

Finding the flat, on the top floor of one of London's terraced streets, was undoubtedly a piece of luck. Joanna had mentioned that she was looking for a flat-sitter when she had last had a coffee with Annie's mother.

'I know I could make good money renting it on the open market, but what would I do about darling Flick, who would hate the apartment in Spain?' she had said to Letty. 'I can't bear to leave her, but it would still be better for her to be able to pad around her own home rather than having to think *dónde* the cat flap? Can Annie be trusted? She's a sweetheart, I know, Letty, but I'm not keen on wild parties or such things. Now she's working for that PR company, she's probably got a taste for the good life.'

Once she'd been offered 23d Cranbourne Terrace, Annie swore there would be no such thing as parties, wild or not, and that she would nurture everything, including the miniature orange tree on the kitchen shelf above the sink. And of course Flick. A place of her

own would rescue her from the childlike state enforced by remaining in her mother's comfortable yet stifling Hampshire farmhouse. How liberating to come home at night without having to tiptoe around the creaking boards on the stairs and in the upstairs hall (she knew the culprits intimately) and see the light in her mother's room switch off as she walked past in acknowledgement of her safe return. When her father had died, nine years ago, Annie and her sister Beth had been left to look after their mother. But enough time had passed now, surely, for her to move on.

'Now, I'll lock all my linens and valuables in this cupboard here in the spare room – although I don't imagine you will keep it spare. You're welcome to use my bedroom for yourself so you can get a pal in to help with the rent. But only one. I only want two living here. And a girl, of course,' said Joanna, giving her blonde perm a comforting pat as she and Annie continued their tour of the flat.

The rooms were wallpapered, the sitting room a cheerful stippled green, the bedrooms in smart stripes, while the floors were covered in smooth matting. It was orderly and attractive – like its owner, thought Annie. She imagined the boxy sofa covered in her faded Indian throw and could see the perfect spot for the rag rug she had in her room at home. It would be so easy to make the flat more her own. Joanna plumped up the small square silk cushions lined up on the sofa and walked over to tweak the yellow curtains that hung to the floor.

'I love this place. It's a wrench to leave it, but I'm sure you'll be a great caretaker, Annie. Now, I warn you, the soundproofing is *non-existent*. The bedrooms might as well not have walls – which is no problem for me, all on my lonesome.' She offered a small, neat smile. 'You can hear Bob and Gina upstairs as if they were *literally* in the same room as you. They love to pop on their old records: *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* are particular favourites. Most odd. At times, they seem to be up all night.'

As Annie left the building, she was immediately immersed in the relentless stuff of city life: the piles of rubbish outside the small

local stores, the dusty display of the charity shop, the rich sickly smell from the kebab stand. Looking through the filthy window of Major Mini Cabs at the huddle of silent men waiting for a job that would allow them to move their illegally parked cars, she thought of Sal and Kendra. Weren't they returning tomorrow from Corfu? It was a real shame that they all couldn't live there, all three of them.

Yanni's bar was situated just outside the busiest part of Kassiopi's harbour. The smells of grilled meat and fish, oregano and rosemary, mixed with a tang from the sea, hung over the main drag, where couples strolled arm in arm, dodging the multitude of juddering, badly driven mopeds.

'A couple of drinks, Ken, and then we'll head back,' promised Sal, threading her way through the tangle of tables to one near the darkened bar that had a good view of the harbour. 'Metaxa for me,' she said to the small, black-haired waitress scurrying between the tables so fast she barely stopped. She turned to Kendra. 'And you?'

'A retsina and a glass of water, please,' she replied, looking at Sal in her red slashed-neck T-shirt, her thin brown arms protruding from its boxy shape, hair slicked back in a smooth cap. Kendra envied Sal her streamlined quality; she was always primed for action, lithe as a Siamese cat. She watched her light a cigarette, blowing the smoke in rings into the night.

'It drives my dad mad when I do this,' said Sal. 'He always says, "Cigarettes are not a circus trick, Salome. But if you want to dig your own grave" dot dot dot . . . Always that "dot dot dot . . ." Funny, how nobody else calls me Salome. I think it was my mum's one flamboyant gesture, calling me that, and now I'm always Sal.'

'Well, since you never tell anyone you're called Salome, how are they meant to know?' responded Kendra, mildly irritated by Sal's predictable show of self-obsession.

The irritation was lost on Sal, who continued, 'She might as well have called me Sally. Well, thank God she didn't. Living in Cheltenham was dull enough without being called Sally. I'll get these,' she volunteered as the waitress appeared with drinks on a metal tray.

'Can you see my bag?' Kendra rummaged on the floor for the two identical woven-cloth bags they had bought from a small stall earlier in the week, blue, with the traditional white key pattern edging them. She peered into each and handed Sal hers. Sal dug around for some notes. 'There goes my last drachma. I'll have to borrow off you tomorrow.' Three boys were approaching. They stopped just before reaching the girls, their voices carrying in Greek, the shortest pushing the others in a bantering move. Two sat at an adjacent table while the third penetrated the dark hole of Yanni's and returned with a backgammon set. Sal smiled at Kendra, raising an eyebrow and her glass. 'To Greek nights,' she toasted.

As the dusk was replaced with darkness, the town began to light up, candles twinkling on the hundreds of bar and restaurant tables that lined the quayside. Sal felt the familiar embracing warmth induced by ouzo, wine and rough brandy. The world was grand.

'Lover's leap?' she asked, leaning over towards the backgammon players, questioning the red player on his brazen manoeuvres.

'He's brave,' replied his friend, the fine gold chain and cross around his neck lying on his white T-shirt. His voice came as a surprise; it was heavily accented with American.

'Oh, you're a Yank, are you?' Sal twisted her chair towards the table. 'I had you down for Greeks.'

'We're all Greek guys,' answered the boy playing black, looking up at Sal as he slid the counters crisply across the board. 'We go to college in the States and we're home for the holidays. Gotcha,' he concluded triumphantly, lifting off the final counters. 'Alexei –' He gestured, introducing his opponent and finishing off his bottle of beer. Alexei waved at Sal and Kendra. 'Marcus,' he continued, 'and I'm Kosti.' He emphasized the first syllable. The clock in the bell tower chimed midnight as the music from the bars grew louder, drawing in the groups of people parading along the front. Sal was in her element. She toyed with the three boys like a skilled puppeteer. The two weeks' holiday had given her a dark tan, making her unexpectedly pale-blue eyes more vivid.

As Sal chatted vivaciously, Kendra could see Alexei, the loser of

the game, being drawn into Sal's compelling orbit. Kendra had witnessed Sal on form before. She could laugh one minute in an utterly dismissive way that would bruise the *amour propre* of her would-be suitors and then instantly, in a glance, or a small movement, bathe them in warm, sexy appreciation. The ashtrays filled up and Kosti bought another round of drinks. Sal draped her arm around him, turning her gaze away from Alexei, fiddling with the piles of backgammon counters. Alexei, suddenly unsure of whether he had pulled or not, looked confused. As she downed another glass of lethal rough brandy, Sal became ever more garrulous and all-embracing.

'Come to London. Yeah – come and stay with us.'

Kendra looked at Sal, who she knew had no permanent bed in the capital, let alone somewhere for three boys to stay. 'We'll take you around – there are fantastic clubs now. Great music.'

'"Ninety-nine luftballons."' Sal sang along cheerfully to the summer's Euro hit.

'It's sad, but we're going back tomorrow,' Kendra told them.

'Yeah, it's our last night, so it has to be fun.' Sal smiled warmly at Kendra. 'One to remember.' Kendra rubbed her arms, a little cold now, as she watched Sal disappear on to the small dance floor behind the bar with Alexei, his dark-blond curls a contrast to her neat, dark head.

Without Sal, the table felt empty, and the remaining three shifted uncomfortably, unsure what move to make next. Kosti stood up and stretched. 'I'm going to check out Athene's, just along the street,' he said. As an afterthought, he offered, 'Coming?' to Kendra, who accepted the invitation, glad of an opportunity to move from where she had sat for far too long. She scooped up her bag, weighty with the book she was reading.

'You can leave it here, I'm staying. Or I'll give it to your friend,' suggested Marcus.

'Great, thanks. I'll be back soon,' replied Kendra, walking quickly to catch up with Kosti, who had exited the crowded bar area and was striding away. It was a relief to be outside, and walking, and

when she returned she could pick up Sal and leave for home.

Kosti was a friendly enough companion, explaining that the three of them came from Athens and were taking business courses in the States. 'We love Corfu – it's party time.' He gestured at the bustling harbour. 'We head here every summer before we're into lockdown with our families. Greek mums want their boys with them, especially ones like us who've managed to escape across the Atlantic for half the year.'

'It's a beautiful island,' said Kendra. Even with the lights of the noisy town, she could see the stars above clearly. 'These are the last stars I'll be seeing for some time,' she continued. 'West London's not exactly renowned for its clear skies. Is that the Plough or the Sickle?' She was still struggling to keep up with Kosti. It was obvious that he had little interest in her, or in stargazing.

After a quick look at Athene's, where Kosti found nothing to keep him, they walked in near-silence back to Yanni's. The tables they had occupied were now empty, the ashtrays clean, the glasses removed. There was no sign of Marcus.

'My bag,' gasped Kendra, with a rush of relief when she saw the white key pattern in the tangle of cane chair legs. 'Thank God.' She pulled it up, immediately sensing its unfamiliar weightlessness. There was nothing inside apart from a tube of lipsalve and some cigarettes. 'Shit, it's Sal's. Where's mine? Where's Sal?' Kendra remembered that she had offered to carry the room key in hers and, of course, Sal had spent the last of her cash.

She looked towards the bar and ran into the dark room where the cheap fluorescent light picked up the figures on the dance floor shifting to the synthesized beat. Even as she scanned for the bright red of Sal's T-shirt, she knew she wouldn't be there. How could she? Idiot. And how could she, Kendra, have left her bag with some Greek college boy and trusted Sal to stick around? She had seen the third metaxa downed, witnessed the transition from friendly sobriety to taunting recklessness that Sal displayed when drunk. She might have guessed she would disappear. She would simply have forgotten about Kendra. The bell tower chimed two.

'She'll turn up later. Don't worry. She's with Alexei,' said Kosti as they stood in the still-busy harbour. 'I can give you this for a taxi home.' It would be worth the drachma to get rid of this tall, serious girl. He saw her into a battered white Nissan and watched it move off creakily on to the coastal road. Kendra leant back on the plastic seats clutching Sal's useless bag. The road was dark and unfamiliar, lined with pines and gorse and lit only by the occasional headlight speeding in their direction. The air was still warm, but she was chilly.

After ten minutes, the taxi drew to a halt by a white sign with the Greek lettering for 'Kanariki' above the English version. The driver gestured down the dusty, winding road.

'Please, can you drive me?' asked Kendra, pointing in the direction of the road. 'It's so dark.' She mimicked blindness, putting her hands across her eyes.

'*Ochi*.' The driver shrugged and delivered a stream of words which Kendra understood to mean that he wasn't going to risk his tyres. Pointing at the meter, which was at 3,000 drachma, he put out his hands to show five fingers then jabbed at his watch to indicate late-night rates. Kendra climbed out, shoved the 3,000 drachma Kosti had given her into the driver's hands and started to run down the hill, the noise of her shoes on the pebbles and dried pine cones amplified by the silence of the night. As she rounded a corner a shaft of moonlight appeared and she could see to the end of the road and the shimmer of water. Something ran across her path – a fox, a wild dog? Jesus, what kind of things lived in these woods? She increased her speed.

The hamlet lay in darkness as she climbed up the outside stairs to their room. She would have to sleep on the terrace. During the day, the wash of the sea sounded so delightful, but now, in the night, it felt threatening. This was it, finally. Sal had pushed it too far this time. She was selfish. No – more than selfish. Kendra thought back to the last incident with Sal, where Kendra had been left stranded at a party in a suburban mansion off the A1 to which she had agreed, against her wishes, to go as Sal's 'date'. Each time, though, her fury

with Sal was tempered by a greater feeling of annoyance for allowing herself to become the victim. Why did she do it? She wasn't a helpless person with no control over events. Why on earth had she left Sal on the dance floor? What had she been thinking to leave her bag? She lay on the floor, Sal's thin cotton bag under her head and the red towel, hung out to dry in the early evening on the railings, as her blanket and closed her eyes, hoping in a childish way that, if she could not see anything, it would not see her. No fox, no rapist, no fucking coyotes . . . did they have coyotes in Greece? Or was it wolves?