

Kissing the sunrise

The beach hummed, anticipating the rising sun. People walking, paddling, fishing. Two sitting cross-legged, eyes closed in benediction towards the golden orb rising above the horizon. Sand crab trails meandered in snaky lines across the surface of the soft, warm sand.

My odyssey, thinking it would lead to marriage, had curdled. I didn't know why. She had fled our hotel bed to be alone, but I could not let it rest. Just three weeks of breathless anticipation left before the wedding day, and she had informed me it was off. No explanation. As the sun made its transit up into the eastern sky, I kept my distance, watching Elenna my love. Perhaps we had moved too quickly, like impatient teenagers anxious to jump into the marriage bed. Three months from our first meeting on the island until my return to Corfu for a Greek wedding.

My phone vibrated. An incoming text.

<are you still in the room? I am on the beach watching the sunrise. Glorious>

She was so tranquil, like an artwork made of willow stems swaying gently in the breeze. I loved her with every aching fibre of my heart.

My phone vibrated again.

<I assume you are not coming.>

She turned her back and walked away along the open expanse of the golden beach, so different from my home with its small grubby beaches, the black striations on the sand a legacy of the coal mines. I matched her pace, a stalker with no evil intent. The relentless tides left their own undulating, wavy lines in the dark sand grains. The cool surf washed over my feet which left no lasting imprint. I saw her texting again.

<We need to talk>

<happy to... I am right behind you>

<Ok, but sort out your punctuation in texts, please. It drives me mad. >

I chuckled as she turned. The lines of her tears were clear upon her pallid cheeks. Using a delicate toe, she drew a straight line in the damp sand between us, as if daring me to cross.

"We cannot marry," she said. "I should have told you. I am dying. I have known for a few days. I could not find the words. I will not leave you a widower so soon."

Taking her hands into mine I crossed her line in the sand with my big toe. An X, not a barrier. A kiss for the lady glowing in the sunrise.

"We will marry. I'll bring the day forward. Every precious moment together will be full."

"Can you bear..."

"I can bear anything for you if I am with you."

"Hug me please."

"I thought you would never ask."

Later, we walked from the hotel, not to the wide-open beach but along a rough track which led to several small private coves. Though we now walked upon the dust of ages where once ancient Greeks might have walked, in truth since the moment of revelation we had been walking

on eggshells, sanding on a tightrope over a chasm filled with jagged rocks, like dinosaur teeth. We hadn't spoken about the illness, though I had so many questions that I wanted to ask. Neither had we spoken much about the future. Back at the hotel but away from our room I had already started the ball rolling on bringing the wedding forward. We had spent much of the afternoon apart, trying to re-discover the art of being together. My greatest fear was that she would prevail in the discussion about wedding or no wedding although I was resolved that nothing would stop me marrying this amazing woman.

At the junction of the main path with the narrower patch leading to the cove hung a driftwood shingle which, convention said, needed to be hung on the other side of the path to indicate the cove was occupied. Elenna moved the driftwood, and we carried on down a gentle slope, hand in hand, careful of every word we might say now, our transit shrouded by the small trees, down onto the mixture of sand and pebble.

I dropped my towel onto a flat rock to remove my shorts, then padded over the warm pebbles to the cool sea which was ever so inviting. Just as my toes created ripples in the sea Elenna broke surface about twenty metres from shore. She continued to swim parallel with the shore, using a clean, rhythmic stroke to power through the waves. I saw that the shore dipped suddenly and plunged headfirst into the blue just at the transition of colours. Where the hot sun had begun to make my skin tingle, the sea felt cold on the initial plunge, but I soon warmed up as my stroke carried me steadily away from the shoreline. I am not the most powerful of swimmers, never have been even at school, but was strong enough to hold my own against the incoming waves breaking into white surf. Elenna had already made her turn and was heading back to my position when once more with a powerful kick she disappeared under the surface into the deep blue. I treaded water until she reappeared on the other side of me, at first just a head then her upper body breaking from the water. I could not hide my surprise. She was naked, at least from

the waist up, and the sight of her body refracted by the clear blue sea took my breath in a way the cold water had failed to do. She was not at all oblivious to my surprise; in fact, she seemed to be relishing it. I moved onto my back, sculling with my arms to keep myself afloat. The water was so clear that it was obvious that I was wearing swimming trunks, and she was completely naked.

“You didn’t say,” I spluttered through the sea water lapping up onto my face.

“What?”

“That you wouldn’t be wearing swim clothes.”

“Here I don’t. On the main beach I would. I am not embarrassed in front of you, but I would not want to embarrass you by having you think it was compulsory or expected. I won’t be embarrassed if you chose to swim naked too or annoyed if you don’t.”

“Perhaps later. You are a stronger swimmer than I realised.”

“Most Greeks are Sam. Come, follow me.”

In an instant she had turned onto her front and struck out for the northern arm of the bay, followed by me struggling to close the gap she created with strong strokes. Unsurprisingly she reached the rocks first, stepping up onto one rock to make the clamber onto a large flat rock leaning on a slight incline. Worn smooth by years of the sea’s relentless action it was just enough slope to catch the late afternoon sun but also provide a surface to stretch out on. When I eventually joined her on the table of rock she was grinning from ear to ear, enjoying the blush upon my cheeks. There was no point in me pretending that I was not looking at her nakedness though I tried to concentrate on eye-to-eye contact.

“I am sorry Sam; do I embarrass you? Do you imagine all Greek women are so suffocated in traditional morality that we dare not be seen by men outside of the home or a hotel room?”

I sat, dripping, upon the rock and replied,

“No, not that. I guess I was just not expecting such openness out here. You can surely forgive a boy for not knowing where to look.”

“You can look all you want Sam. If the bay were not so private I could not bathe in this fashion. There are some beaches on the island where people swim without clothes, but it is not widespread or encouraging. In this place I do as I please. As may you. I do not encourage you into the sun, but you are free to do so.”

“It’s not a thing you see often on Scottish beaches, that’s for sure.” There was a moment then to decide, and on the spur, I slipped my swim shorts off and draped them over the edge of the table rock. I did not stretch out as Elenna had done but remained sitting like an old Greek statue, my modesty hidden by a raised leg cocked at the knee. “It is good to feel the sun like this,” I agreed.

“Yes, it is. So, my friend, are you warming to Corfu? Is she melting your heart?”

I paused, just long enough to show I was considering an answer.

“A bit, I confess, but I would not give the island all the credit.” There, it was out.

She was not discomfited in the slightest by my reply though I knew how much she wanted me to love Corfu as she did. She was astute enough to read behind the coded answer.

“Places are great Elenna and this island more than most, I will admit, but it is people whom I connect with, or not. Real estate doesn’t move me very much. That’s why someone else runs our property division. Corfu is grand, but I have more interest in you, and that should be no surprise at all to you, not if we are to be married. Even though you say our days together are now limited.”

“I am sorry if I shocked you. I just didn’t know how to tell you. Clearly, we still have much to discuss, but for now, perhaps you could relax in the sun beside me. You might even consider

kissing me unless that seems hopelessly presumptuous in your words. I am dying, I am not delicate porcelain which must not be handled.”

“Are you going to joke about this all the time?”

“No, but I will sometimes tame the thoughts in my head. I will not give into it.”

I turned to recline upon one arm, feeling the gentle rasp of stone upon my bony elbow. Staring down into her eyes there was no doubt at all in my mind as to how I felt about this woman. Would always feel. Was this the magic of Corfu she talked about so often?

I leaned down with the midday sun beating upon my back, just far enough to permit the urgency in our lips to collide.

“You have marvellous self-control Sam,” she remarked, looking down upon my nakedness. Or are you not interested now?” You did not show the same restraint back in the motel room.”

“I will never be disinterested in you. I think it is the fear of been watched from the trees.”

“Let them watch.”

We made the swim back to shore after a half hour basking on their rock, under a full sun. After the kiss, she placed her fingers upon my lips and said ‘not yet please’ I waited patiently. On the shore Elenna wrapped herself in a sarong which matched the striated shades of blue of the sea in the little bay. She had given her spare sarong to me, a muted one in shades of brown, and after some hesitation I had accepted, awkwardly wrapping my lower body in the unfamiliar garment. If people could only see me now, shorn of my suit which was my armour. We unpacked our little picnic of a Greek salad with fresh quartered tomatoes, cucumber and a slab of herby Feta cheese balanced on top. A basket of fresh bread and a bottle of wine completed our feast.

“Tell me something of Edinburgh Sam. I have never been. Perhaps now I will never go. I have been to London. Would I think they are the same?”

“Only if you think Athens and Corfu Town are the same.”

“I am confused.”

“I don’t mean one is a city and the other isn’t. London and Edinburgh are both capital cities. Corfu Town hardly seems the right name for the place which is the capital of the island and the major transport hub for the island. I mean in the way the two cities feel, the impressions they give, a sense of warmth perhaps but always with a bit of an edge. Of course, the locals sound quite different. I have no ear for Greek dialects yet to work out if I can hear different intonations of Greek.”

“We all sound the same, is that what you are saying?”

“I suppose I am, but I hope not in an insulting way.”

“Intriguing. Have you always lived in Edinburgh?” Elenna hadn’t quite mastered the soft ending to the name which came out as ‘burg.’

“Born and bred as they say. It helped that I inherited the family business which tied me to the city, I suppose in perpetuity. Do we have that in common?”

“Not exactly, but please, go on. I will explain later.”

“I have too much invested in it. Time, money, blood, sweat and tears. I love to travel but it is difficult to think of ever selling the firm. That was one of the things we promised each other to discuss, remember? The trouble is that I promised the old man I would take the business on to the next generation. The things we promise to our parents.”

“The yokes we put around our own necks Sam.”

“Exactly that. Of course, my problem with the promise is that there is as yet no next generation to inherit it from me. I was made an offer for the company a few years back from a firm of solicitors whom I know well. We have crossed swords many times in the Edinburgh Courts, and they would not disgrace our name. They even promised never to take our family name off the board above the door but run it as a partner enterprise, but I was not ready to sell up. Maybe the truth is I never will be.”

“You don’t share the business with your sister then?”

“If Maggie had been a qualified lawyer, then of course she would have been a partner, but she has no interest in the law which means if she joined the firm, it would be as an employee. That doesn’t seem fair. She was recompensed in other ways in the will, and she does get a regular share of the profits of the firm. Money isn’t everything I know, but I haven’t found a better way to deal with the situation. She is fiercely independent thank goodness and is forging her own future.”

“Thank goodness?”

“Doesn’t every boy want their sister to live an independent and successful life of their own choosing?”

“That is something we could discuss for hours in the Greek context believe me. I am not convinced that my brothers would agree with you. In many Greek families there is still a strong thought that women are destined for marriage and children, not careers. Perhaps this is not the time to open that can of worms?”

“Perhaps not, but I would like to know your hopes.”

“The hopes I had, or the few which I still have? I think I wanted to be like Maggie too, independent, and free to choose my path. That does not exclude the possibility of children or marriage but on my terms. I won’t be subservient, I can assure you of that, nor confined to the kitchen and the olive press no matter the length of time we have together. You know I have my own small businesses which my father did help me to establish, but I quickly paid my investment back. Their success or otherwise is down to me. That is a good feeling. At the moment, they are a success. My yiayia did not teach me much but I have learned how to cook in the proper Greek way. It is just a part of me, it does not define me.”

“I am glad to hear it. This salad is very good by the way. Does this count as Greek cooking?”

“Loosely. The trick is always to use freshly picked ingredients and the very best olive oil that you can find. The feta cheese is hand-made in small batches by a friend in the north of the island. It does have much more of a tang than shop bought feta. The bread was baked by my grandmother this morning. That’s the only secret to the dish Sam. Love and affection.”

“Thank you. I am enjoying it and confess I never eat salad at home unless it is in a sandwich. I feel guilty about that now. Perhaps at home a Greek salad would never quite taste the same, without the sun and the company.”

“The compliment is accepted with thanks on behalf of everyone who contributed to the salad. I hope the wine is to your taste too. It is an experiment of ours, a different blend of grapes and a process which we have not tried before.”

I held the glass up to the light. The wine was ‘white’ by name but had a very distinct orange colour which was not matched in its taste. Had it ever been close to an orange at any stage?

"I'll admit the first taste was unexpectedly sharp, but there is a depth to the taste that I don't get from white wine usually. Different. Maybe an acquired taste for some. The label says orange wine, but is it really made from oranges, even partly?"

"Not at all. To make an orange wine, you first take white grapes, mash them up, and then put them in a large ceramic fermentation vessel. We leave the grapes complete with skins and seeds fermenting for anywhere between a week and a year with just the tiniest bit of added yeast if we think the skins do not have enough of a natural blush of yeast. We have to test batches every month for a year to see which one we might wish to sell. This bottle comes from the batch that was matured for six months. I think this has been the best one so far. Does it taste sour to you Sam?"

"Sour isn't the word I would use, but maybe that's because I think of vinegar or onions when I think of sour. It is quite tart, sharp on the tongue but when it is down it mellows. The important thing for me if you are asking..."

"I am. "

"The most important thing is that it is different which can be difficult to find in a white wine, for me at any rate. I would put this out for friends over dinner as something unusual and unexpected to surprise them with."

"Do you entertain often at home?"

"Heavens no. Very very occasionally Martin and I might have two guests around."

"Ladies?"

"Occasionally. Not any more obviously. I did not get engaged to dully dally with other women. What do you think of me? "

"Soon you will have to find someone else. Perhaps dinner with friends is the way to find someone?"

"I don't like the way this conversation is going, sorry."

"Okay, tell me about Martin."

"My best friend since university. He is a doctor in Edinburgh. If he does come round for dinner, with or without friends we always order something in from a restaurant take away service. I would not subject anyone to my cooking."

"Not even me?"

"Especially not you after the dinner the other night and this lunch today. You have set the bar way too high for me."

"Shame. Perhaps we can negotiate?"

"I have nothing to negotiate with. I am on alien territory here."

"I would not say nothing Sam. When we were on the rock, I asked you 'not yet.' I did not say 'never again' did I?"

"No, you did not," I replied softly, my voice a little raspy, my throat closing with the fear and anticipation.

For a while we just sat on the blanket onto the sand, listening to the waves.

Elenna lay down upon the chequered surface and rolled onto her side, watching with amusement as I tried to mimic her actions without incurring an embarrassing accident with my sarong. Eventually I succeeded and rolled onto my right side to face Elenna, unsure of mine or her intent, but determined not to make a wrong step.

"You don't have to lie so far away from me Sam. No-one can see us here and I don't bite anything I don't choose to."

"Sorry, this entire day has been such an unexpected roller coaster. I'll wake up in a minute and maybe find it was a dream."

“At least you don’t say nightmare, which is something. Closer. You can touch me. I don’t break. You won’t break either if I touch you?” I shuffled closer as instructed until not even a single leaf from an olive branch could have fitted between us. Sensing my lingering timidity, and amused by it, she leaned forward to kiss me, a long sensual touch upon my lips that set a fire in my senses. My arm looped over her waist, anchoring her slim body against him as my hand roamed gently over her naked shoulders, caressing the back of her neck. Neither of us seemed in any hurry to break the contact between our lips, not even to breathe. When at last our lips parted her smile was gently mocking.

“Well, my handsome Scottish man, what are your intentions? Honourable or dishonourable?”

Too quickly, and with perhaps with a little too much volume I cried ‘honourable of course’ before I caught the twinkle in her eyes and the mischievous grin on her face. She did not allow me the time for another comment but pushed her long nails through my chest hair to dig lightly into the skin, enough to draw a wince but not blood. Her hands strayed down from my chest towards the waist of my sarong, exploring and finally tugging the end of it free, encouraging the sarong to fall open. She could have offered me no clearer sign of her desire, my response to hers being all too evident. In response, I tugged at her sarong, slipping it clear of our naked bodies. Her hand closed around me, a warm embrace which only served to intensify my response. I twisted just enough to take one nipple gently between my teeth, not biting but gripping just enough for my tongue to dart and settle upon her, a butterfly seeking a sweet flower. After some moments, in a breathless whimper I said,

“Tell me what you want Elenna. I can experiment, but tell me, please.”

As if we might be overheard, she whispered in my ear, her most ardent desires confided to the man whom she had known for scarcely more than a heartbeat. If I was surprised, I hid it

well and continued to kiss her tanned body from neck to toe, not yet venturing to the place which she named. Over her breasts, the nipples eager, her tummy, flat and toned as an athlete, over her thighs, slowly towards her knees and the daintiest feet I had ever kissed. With eyes wide open I registered every wrinkle, every fold, every little bump upon her golden skin. The tiny mole on her left thigh. The sounds which emanated from her open mouth spoke of pleasure, encouraging my lips to embark on the return journey, this time not venturing above that mole upon her thighs.

Elenna grasped my hair in her fist and pulled my head towards the unruly tangle of dark hair nestling between her thighs. I allowed my tongue to lie upon the dark triangle, moving gently, probing, waiting, and hoping for a sign that she would relax and allow me to penetrate the sweet realms inside. For a while she resisted, allowing my tongue to roam and explore just within the dark mound, seeking a path through the forest. She did not shave there as so many modern women seemed to do, but neither was the patch thick and luxuriant. I was patient, turning my tongue in small circles, occasionally feeling the damp skin below the hair. After some minutes I felt her resistance yield, the slightest parting of her lips which allowed my tongue to fully enter her secret place. I pushed to the back of my mind my amazement that this was the very first time I had tried to please her this way, always fearing her reaction. I probed deeper, knowing exactly where the prize lay. As it touched upon the spot, I had been seeking a brief sigh came from the lady's lips and to respond she opened the gate a little farther as my efforts intensified. My eager tongue pushed and probed, turned, and twisted, feeling the dampness increase. Our sounds increased as my control began to weaken, such was my delight at the slightly sweet and sour taste of this woman. How long I continued I did not count, my pleasure masking any sense of real time. Just faintly I heard Elenna say 'now, please' and I lifted my head, sliding my body upwards slowly until I could slip inside her, smooth, hard, eager, so deep I

thought to anchor myself there for eternity. Elenna closed tightly around me, holding me there, telling me that no matter what befell us in the months to come, she would never let me go. This woman of my dreams, all that I desired, all that I needed to be complete as a man.

“Perfect Sam. You do listen. Now, don’t stop. Don’t ever stop loving me. Please.”

I smiled as I moved inside her with delicious intent.

As if the thought had ever crossed, could ever cross, would ever cross my mind.

Till death do us part.