

SOCIAL WALLPAPER

a novel by
portersteve

(10k sampler)

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This book is a work of fiction.

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Also by portersteve

FIREWORKS

THE AIRPLANE

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1

Kos Island, Greece

My brother Ryan gets a bandage on his upper right arm, which is where our injury is. Two small measures of clear liquid are placed in front of us, and their deliverer waits while we consume them, before taking the glasses away. Without asking whether or not we smoke, cigarettes are slipped into our mouths and lighters are flicked. We just sit dumb. Even after it's gone I can still see the flame in front of my eyes, a wound of yellow.

Ryan looks at me. His lips move, but no words come out. Across the street, one of the staff disappears into the bar, only to reappear a few seconds later with a look of panic in his eyes. I can guess what has happened. The story of our arrival has been reported to the boss; our bloodied condition described.

Then the bar door opens and the boss appears, weaving his way between the tables outside with a succession of tight, deliberate steps. His black hair is slicked back from his face, his nose is underlined by a powerful black moustache. He signals with his hands as he walks, issuing directives to the four bar staff who have surrounded us outside the café. He reaches our table, his mouth

chewing at something uncomfortable.

Someone deals with the introductions, bowing ever-so-slightly as he says the name:

Mr Fotopoulos.

One of them moves the chair opposite us out. One of them pushes it forward beneath his bending legs as he sits. One of them suspends a lighter at the end of his cigar, checking first for a tiny affirmative crinkle of his brow before administering fire. There are some kissing noises. For a few moments Mr Fotopoulos is engulfed in the effort of kindling. One of the staff fans away the excess smoke.

Mr Fotopoulos grumbles quietly at Ryan's bandaged right arm, shaking his head, gesturing with hands, eyes all sympathetic. Then he takes his cigar by the hand and leads it a healthy distance from his lips and begins to speak.

"Now, we go in the car, we find the ones that attack you, and we kill them. You got knives?"

Ryan shakes his head. I shake mine.

No.

No knives.

Mr Fotopoulos scowls at us. "We get you knives. They insult my business by doing these things to you. You work for me- they insult my business."

I try to speak but the words won't come. My lungs are already surviving on thimble-sized rations. This- just- can't- be- happening-

But it is.

Ryan manages to stutter out something like: "we're okay, it's- just a cut," but Mr Fotopoulos dismisses his protest with a broad,

backhanded wave. He puts the cigar back into his mouth, its smoke dwindled. One of the staff readies himself with a lighter. Another gets his out for backup. Mr Fotopoulos watches us carefully as the cigar is resurrected by a minutes worth of sucking and tugging. We all wait. The lighters are put away. The smoke-cloud is cleared.

“Today it’s just a cut, but tomorrow- who knows?”

Somehow, from somewhere, I get my voice back. “They thought we were Matt Harris. They said something about him killing one of their Greek friends- in the alleyway- at the side of the bar.” I point to the nearby alley.

Mr Fotopoulos bangs his fist down on the table. The bar staff gathered round all jump back a step. Hands flutter supportively at shoulders. One of them has his eyes squeezed shut.

“Matt Harris? Pah! He never *touched* the Greek in the alley! He slip and fall on sharp things. And this was an accident, a sad thing that we all regret. Death is bad for business. Bad for the reputation of business.”

I nod furiously.

He nods.

I nod again, matching him.

He stops nodding. “Now I go find the wheels we need. You two can ride with me.”

Coughing away an amphibian, Mr Fotopoulos stands up so quickly that his plastic chair scrapes backwards and almost tumbles over.

He nods at us both in turn, sealing our agreement, before walking briskly back across the road towards a small group of older

men standing outside The British Bulldog bar. The staff follow him, three go inside, while one remains to stack the surrounding chairs.

Now what?

Ryan and I sit outside the café, paralysed from heart down. The café is on the ground floor of the building where our apartment is, where we've been staying as guests of a stranger, a friend of a friend, for less than twenty-four hours. It's just past three in the morning. The bar opposite still has a straggle of customers, tugging drunkenly at their last lagers. I recognise the English accents; the phonetic of fellows. They begin to help each other off stools, laughing, insulting, lurching off into a muddle of voices and limbs.

Ryan watches Mr Fotopoulos arranging our doom with the group of older men and closes his eyes. "Well, what if it's *true*? What if Matt Harris *did* kill that Greek in the alley?" He points to the dark alley at the side of The British Bulldog bar. "And if you think about what Lisa and Donna told us about him, it fits, it makes sense, it's probably true."

Lisa and Donna are the two English girls we met shortly after disembarking at Kos harbour in the early hours of yesterday morning. We had asked them for directions. They told us that Matt Harris had killed the Greek in the alley.

Ryan drops his cigarette onto the ground beneath the table. It lands in some spilt drink and lets off a satisfied sizzle, its mission completed; the delivery made.

Mr Fotopoulos is still with the group across the street. He flings his arms around in the air as he talks, while the men with him nod in enthusiastic agreement. When he starts using his right arm to

make huge slashing motions with what could be an imaginary blade, the men nod even more encouragingly. I wonder stupidly about the sort of tunes his orchestra might play if he were the conductor. Nervous, edgy melodies, with large, unpredictable percussion. And who would choose to play beaten-up second fiddle for that?

We've got to get out of here.

We just need to get our bags. I can see them in my mind, leant up against a wall or sprawling untidily on a floor. I can picture the colour of the fabric, the nostalgic dangle of address tags. I think about the security of their weight upon my back, of straps gnawing affectionately at my shoulders.

It's time to go. While Mr Fotopoulos has his back to us, still holding court, seemingly distracted. The guy doing the chairs has gone inside.

Ryan stands up first, very slowly, lifting his chair up and moving it back, trying to avoid the scrape. Cringing, I do the same. Then we edge ourselves away from the table in the direction of the stairwell that opens up at the side of the cafe. I think about all the places that we could be staying at: the campsites and the luxurious complications of tent erection; the overpriced hotels. Then I think about where we *are* staying.

In Matt's apartment. Matt Harris: the alleged alley-killer.

We reach the stairwell.

We pause briefly. Mr Fotopoulos is still talking, waving his arms about.

Matt's place is on the second floor. Our feet take the steps. Questions escort my ascension.

Is Matt Harris going to be there?

Did he *really* kill the Greek in the alley?

What if the Greek boys from outside The Union Jack bar that attacked us have realised their mistake, and have somehow sneaked into Matt's apartment, looking to finish the job?

I expect footsteps to sound behind us at any moment, for there to be cries demanding our location.

Where are they?

The English!

"C'mon," Ryan says, to speed us up. We reach the first floor landing. One more flight.

There is nothing left to say.

We reach the second floor and begin to move along an open plan hallway made from grey, angular concrete. One side looks out over the street from above the café; the other is lined with doors leading off to various apartments. Matt's apartment is at the very end of the hall. We edge our way along, keeping our bodies in single file against the far wall.

Then through the open side, I see a car pull up alongside Mr Fotopoulos and his deputies outside The British Bulldog bar.

"Look!"

Ryan looks. "Shit."

"We've got to get out of here. Lisa and Donna were right. We should never have come."

The car engine idles. A conversation begins between Mr Fotopoulos and the driver.

Any second now they'll call out. Any second now...

We arrive outside Matt's door, which is very slightly ajar. Light frames the door in thin, bright slits, making a man sized rectangle at its edges. I give the door a slight push. It opens onto a short hallway, about ten feet long, lit from above by a bold strip-light. At the end is another door that opens onto the main space of the apartment. We enter the hallway, closing the front door behind us, leaving it on the latch. The silvery glints of Matt's precious *collection* adorn the walls.

There is silence.

"Matt?" I call softly, but there's no answer. Maybe he didn't hear me? I almost call louder. Ryan puts a finger up to his lips and makes his eyes look urgent.

I hear a squeak noise like a mattress. I wait with anxious ears for a voice, for Ryan's name, or my name, to be called expectantly from behind the door.

Ryan?

Oliver?

Then high-volume electronic dance music suddenly blasts out from inside the apartment. We both jump. Ryan winces, clutching at his injured arm. What is going on? Is Matt having a *party*?

Then it stops. Dead. The music. As quickly as it had started.

Now think. It could be the Greek boys from town. From outside The Union Jack bar- they could have sneaked in, realised their mistake in attacking us. Made their hit on Matt Harris. But then it could be Matt *waiting* for their attack. Maybe he thinks *we're* in league with them somehow? He doesn't know us, really. Maybe Mr Fotopoulos thinks we are in league with them?

I want to run. I want to run until my legs collapse beneath me, until I don't care anymore. But there is no point in running without our passports. A spark of frustration and irritation at being caught up in the troubles of others shoots a pinball of pain around inside of me. We didn't ask for any of this. We just have to get our stuff.

But everything about the door leading into the apartment-into *Matt's* apartment- everything about it shouts *threat*, shouts *danger*, shouts *risk*...

I nod at the walls of the hallway, at *Matt's collection*, and then look at Ryan. He narrows his eyes, indicating that he understands me. I lift one of the collected items carefully down from its mount.

The long metal shape I hold before me glints in the strip-light. We listen, squinting, craning for clues, trying to distinguish sounds from the thump of blood in our heads.

I hear the mattress springs again.

Whoever it is, they're sat on the bed. Probably.

We take another step forward and exchange a look.

Then I raise my right leg slowly off the ground, and while balancing on my left, kick the door open with as much force as I can manage.

We rush into the apartment.

2

Nearly Departed

A few moments later, we stagger from the apartment, our bags bulging awkwardly with unfolded clothes. We don't talk, we just stare straight ahead.

Along the second floor landing.

Into the stairwell.

Down the stairs. Past the first floor landing. Down the stairs and outside the closed-up café, opposite the dead neon of The British Bulldog bar.

Mr Fotopoulos and his deputies, the car, the bar staff, have all gone.

We head for the beach. We find a place among the dunes, and listen to the sea breathing. Ryan checks the guidebook using a lighter to see what time we can catch a boat off the island. The wind blows hair into his eyes. He returns his Los Angeles Raiders baseball hat to his head. We smoke and repack our bags.

The sun emerges and the place starts to fill up with tourists. One or two of them stare at us as they walk by.

“Do you think the people from The British Bulldog will be looking for us?” Ryan asks.

“I don’t know.”

Mid-morning and the clouds roll in like a shock. Tourists stare up into the sky like they’re witnessing an alien invasion.

Clouds, here?

Can’t be.

One minute it’s blue. The next minute it’s black.

When the rain comes, Ryan and I allow ourselves to be carried along with the crowds departing. Our boat off the island is due at three this afternoon. We still have time to kill. The beach bottlenecks at an exit where the sand feeds onto a road. We shuffle forwards in a procession of makeshift hats. Up ahead in the distance I can see The British Bulldog bar. There is no other route through to the port. As we approach, I see with relief that it is still closed; its awning scrunched flat against its outside wall, chairs stacked neatly next to tables.

“I don’t like this,” Ryan says, keeping his eyes fixed forward as we walk level with the place. We are well camouflaged amongst the crowds. Mopeds weave in between, their engines whining and complaining, their riders expressionless behind shades.

I can’t resist a glance as we pass the bar.

I can see one of the staff inside, staring out into the rain. Our eyes meet through the glass. Fear froths up inside. Then I hear a phone ring from within. It’s like we’ve set an alarm off. The barman disappears away from the window to answer it.

I imagine him alerting Mr Fotopoulos:

I saw them, quick, they’re going to get away!

We pass the place where the Greeks who challenged us

outside The Union Jack bar in town finally caught up with us. It all looks so different in the daylight. Ryan puts a hand upon his injured right arm and toys with the blood-crusted edges of his bandage.

Patches of blue sky appear out in the distance. The rain stops.

I think about Matt Harris and the state he was in when we left him in his apartment last night. I think about his mad staring eyes and the peak of his Los Angeles Raiders baseball cap.

The knife the Greeks held to Ryan's throat.

The gasping chase through the town at night

The blood running everywhere in miniature rivers.

It's like films that have illegal one-shot horror-scenes spliced into them. My mind feels cut to pieces. We make it to the port. The place is heaving.

Twelve o'clock comes around.

Half past, quarter to.

We've got to try and remain inconspicuous, if we can. We find a spot by a low wall, just to the side of the quay. I watch the rows of moored up vessels nodding like dogs at the waters edge. I listen to the hornet whine of engines on the harbour road. The minutes pass like hours. Everyone heading in our direction seems like a potential abductor. Every glance threatens to apprehend us.

One o'clock happens, somehow.

Half past, quarter to.

We smoke and read with our shades on and try not to catch anyone's eye. Ryan takes his Los Angeles Raiders baseball cap off. I slope away to one of the nearby ticket dispensaries.

Two o'clock.

Eventually, there's a ferry on the horizon. I spend all my spare thoughts on willing it to move faster.

"This is the one," I insist, pointing, "the *Kamiros*."

We are exhausted. I've got coffee for blood.

"I just want to be *off* this island," Ryan says with a hiss.

"The chances are that no one will have even noticed that we've gone. So no one will be here looking for us."

I haven't mentioned about the barman seeing us through the window as we passed The British Bulldog bar after leaving the beach. And we don't know whether or not Mr Fotopoulos or anyone else connected to The Bulldog has seen Matt or been to his apartment yet.

Then a scuffle breaks out in the crowd behind us. Ryan and I both swing round to see what's happening. Four middle-aged Greeks are shouting at two young white guys with backpacks on their backs. My whole body changes to air.. Ryan puts a hand on my arm for support.

One of the backpackers is wearing a Los Angeles Raiders baseball cap. They make an attempt to mediate with their accusers using American accents, pleading without the usual strength of superpower status.

Hey man, I mean, like, c'mon?

The Greeks are unimpressed.

"They think they're *us*," Ryan says as we're pushed backwards by the force of the crowd behind.

A few metres away at the edge of the quay, the lowering cargo door creates a short distraction, with the sound of chains unwinding

from a grumble of enormous bobbins.

A lone, female-pitched scream re-directs the crowd's attention. I look to see one of the Americans being kicked whilst lying foetal upon the ground. He is in a clearing surrounded by a forest of legs, attempting to shield various parts of himself with his hands. Within seconds his co-traveller is down on the ground with him. The crowd groans deeply as the kicks continue, failing to involve itself beyond observation, completely failing to harness its huge potential for action.

The disturbance soon lures the port authorities, and two bleached cotton officers arrive, their faces red from whistle blowing.

Ryan's face crumples as his wounded arm is crushed in the shove of bodies.

"They *knew* we weren't *American*," I say, as we manage to force our way through the crowd, "we worked for them. They *knew* we were English."

From half way up the boat's steep narrow steps, I look back down at the quay. The bodies of the two American travellers still lie, crouched over by a small number of random Samaritans.

From the top step, I scan for the Greeks who carried out the attack. Surely the beating was meant for us? Surely they were men sent by Mr Fotopoulos? Men from The British Bulldog bar.

Are they going to realise their mistake and board the ferry? To stop him worrying, I tell Ryan that I can see them leaving. He asks me to point them out and I pretend to do so, stabbing an index finger into the air in front of me.

"Where?"

“There.”

“Where?”

“There!”

Then we are forced up onto the decks by the weight of human traffic behind us. Having settled, Ryan traces our journey across one of the maps in the guide book with his finger, its distance in miniature. The guide book’s prophecy of claustrophobia comes true. Travellers lie everywhere in brightly coloured sleeping bags, making a luminous patchwork quilt across the deck.

The *Kamiros* heaves it way out of port and heads northwest to Kalimnos, stopping at Leros and Patmos, where far more join the boat than leave it. Then it’s a due west haul through to Piraeus on the Greek mainland where we take a bus through Athens to the city’s international airport. We arrive in plenty of time for our plane and celebrate our safe passage with drinks in the terminal bar. Ice cubes burble and split.

We take our seats at the back of the plane. I watch the exits intently. The plane starts to fill up. Stewardesses stuff unruly bags into overhead compartments, the seat belt lights come on. Ryan fiddles with his hand luggage. His headphones are in knots. I flick through the in-flight magazine, pulled from the pouch of the seat in front of me. The engines are firing. I wait for us to go through the pre-flight motions.

The stewardesses gather in a huddle at the front of the plane by the front exits. By now they should be explaining how to administer air if the pressure drops.

Adults first. Then children.

The captain's reassuringly calm voice spills out of speakers. He talks about the weather in Greece and its contrast with that back in England. He remarks casually about a slight delay. The stewardesses continue to whisper conspiratorially by the exit. One or two of them are pointing randomly at passengers.

Something is definitely wrong.

Suddenly there are two soldiers on the plane. With guns. The soldiers exchange nods with the stewardesses. They then split up and take an aisle each, walking slowly from the front of the plane towards its rear. They stop at each row in turn and inspect its occupants.

This is it.

They've got us.

I tap Ryan on the leg with my magazine so he notices the soldiers. His face turns ice cream white. I fumble in the seat pouch for a sick bag, but the nausea levels out.

The soldiers continue down the aisles, checking the passengers in each row of seats carefully. They are halfway down the plane. The stewardesses still chat in a huddle by the front exit. The engines whir away outside.

We're completely trapped.

Mr Fotopoulos must have military connections. The soldiers get closer and closer to us. They exchange the occasional irritated word. They make no secret of their guns. They're going to get us. They're going to haul us off and throw us into jail. They're about ten seats away. I can feel my hopes for the future fading.

Five seats and counting. Ryan hits play and closes his eyes. I

think I see a tear on his face but it could be sweat.

Four seats.

I try not to look at them.

Three seats.

I open the in-flight magazine again. A double spread illustrates the various flight paths that our airline operates. The land is in green. The sea is in blue. The lines are red.

Two seats.

I concentrate on the line that links Athens with London. I want to travel that line. I want to get from *a* to *b*.

They're at the row of seats in front. The soldier in our aisle turns to us. I can feel his eyes on me. I try to stay with the magazine, but something is forcing my head up.

I want to focus on that short red line heading North West across Europe between Athens and London, but my head keeps coming up. There is something cold and metallic under my chin. My head continues to comply. The soldier looks at me. His beret taut, his eyes dark. I look at him on the end of the gun. He yanks the gun away. Its sight nicks my chin painfully. He says something to the soldier in the other aisle.

This is it.

Ryan still has his eyes closed. I try to close mine, but they stay open. The soldiers call something out to the stewardesses who nod and reply in slow but unfathomable Greek. The soldiers take a couple of steps back up the plane while they speak and then stop. I reach out and take Ryan's hand. I don't know whether they'll split us up or keep us together.

Then just as suddenly as they arrived, the soldiers walk back up the length of the aisles and exit the plane. Almost immediately, the aircraft taxis out onto the runway, sucks air into its jets and Greece disappears beneath us.

We still expect there to be people waiting for us at Heathrow. Mr Fotopoulos might have contacts; he might have influence over the police. The soldiers were probably just identifying us. The turbulence that would normally freak me out, bumps away unnoticed.

I eat a tray of something. I drink a cup of something else. Ryan and I try to construct some kind of defence. Complete and utter denial is the best we can come up with. We'll claim mistaken identity. Kos was not even on our itinerary. We never went there. We've never even *heard* of the place. And the people in kangaroo courts who produce CCTV and say they saw us there are just liars. They're all liars.

We agree never to speak about the place again. We agree that all the memories should be swept away; swept off the edge of the world into forgetfulness. The words are in me, I know, and eager to spill out, but I will consume them. I will bury them deep inside me, so memories degrade into the status of dreams and unreliable imaginings.

There is no story to tell. I'm going to break up with Amy, even if we are living together in the same student house.

Our plane lands with a thump. We pass through the various gates and arrival procedures. We have nothing to declare. The last two days are invisible in our history. Even the train into London leaves us speechless, stunned by the apparent reality of our escape.

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As the rails rattle beneath us, one question keeps coming up for air.

The question is: On the day before Ryan and I arrived on Kos Island, did Matt Harris *really* kill the Greek in the alley?

3

The Greek In The Alley

Matt Harris sits with Mr Fotopoulos at a table outside the café across the street from The British Bulldog bar. Two cups of coffee are cooling unobtrusively in front of them. It is the day before Ryan and Oliver Longstory arrive on Kos Island. The street is busy with tourists travelling to and from the nearby beach, with beach mats rolled in scrolls. Mr Fotopoulos is picking through some loose-leafed paperwork he has balanced on his lap.

“He’s dead,” says Matt, breaking the silence.

Mr Fotopoulos looks up. He frowns. “Who’s dead? You say *he’s dead*, now say *who’s dead*.”

Matt fiddles with the seal on his portion of coffee creamer. Its plastic tab snaps off. He scowls. “The Greek. The Greek is dead.” He makes another attempt to free the creamer, and, having exerted some pressure with his thumb, squirts a tiny jet of it into the air. Both men assess the liquids trajectory. It lands silently on the table between them without causing injury. “The Greek who I spotted sneaking around yesterday. The Greek employed by Christos. The Greek who I thought might be after the plan.”

“Ah, *the plan*,” Mr Fotopoulos says, putting the tips of his

fingers to his lips and blowing the paperwork on his lap a kiss. His eyes momentarily mist up. He picks a lash away. “Damn my brother Christos! He gives no protection at all to his workers. I protect the people in my business. Someone touch someone who work for me; they insult my business. Who murdered this Greek anyway?”

Matt smiles. He suspends the creamer container above his cup and watches the fluid drip drip drip through the hole into his coffee. Then he points to the alley at the side of The British Bulldog bar. Even in the daytime, its shadows seem to layer and concentrate into a peculiar darkness. Mr Fotopoulos follows the line of Matt’s finger. He looks at Matt, narrowing his eyes.

Matt shrugs a semi-apologetic shrug, the kind of shrug that says: *oops*.

Mr Fotopoulos clears his throat. “I think I am starting to get this, no? The Greek who snoop for Christos, looking for the plan, he die in *our* alleyway?”

“Right.”

Mr Fotopoulos slowly lifts a finger to his throat and drags it across. “And you?”

“Yep.”

“*Really?*”

“Yep.”

“And it’s a mess?”

“Oh, yeah.” Matt grins.

Mr Fotopoulos shakes his head in awe and admiration. “Well, we better get someone down there to clear him up. When did you kill him?”

“Five minutes ago.”

Mr Fotopoulos almost drops his cup in shock. It clanks discordantly on the saucer as he negotiates its fall.

Matt talks quickly. “I caught sight of him as he passed, obviously spying for Christos. He was carrying a beach towel and stuff so he could easily have just been going for a swim, but I gave myself the benefit of the doubt. I just ran across the road and shoved him into the alley. The only problem was he wasn’t alone, this Greek- he had someone with him. I couldn’t take the both of them, so I went for the one that looked the weakest. His mate ran off.”

Hmmm. Mr Fotopoulos takes a slow, deliberate sip of coffee. Then he takes a cigar from his shirt. Someone from the café appears at his side and lights it for him.

Matt waits patiently.

Mr Fotopoulos shrugs. “That’s okay. The one that got away can take the word back to Christos and his boys. That way he’ll *know* it was us. Warn him not to insult my business. Yes, yes. Nice work young man, you take care of business all the time for me now.”

Matt sighs deeply. “No problem.”

“How did you do it, anyway?”

“I slit his throat.”

“Ha! Very nice, The Boy with Knives! He say very much?”

“Just gurgled and looked sorry for himself.”

“And it’s a *big* mess?”

“It will be by now. I had to hose my legs off.”

Mr Fotopoulos leans to his right and peers beneath the table to inspect Matt’s legs. He is wearing shorts and flip-flops: his killer

uniform. His legs are still wet below the knees.

Mr Fotopoulos points at the left. "You missed a bit."

"Oh, cheers," Matt says, glancing down. "The thing is, the dead Greek was the boyfriend of one of the girls who works for you. Lisa Kite?"

"I know all my workers, personally, of course. Why?"

"Well, I think it was Lisa Kite who tipped this Greek off about the plan in the first place. She must have overheard us talking. Either ways, Christos must *know* that you've got a plan of some sort, otherwise why would he send someone around to snoop for it?"

Mr Fotopoulos rolls smoke around his mouth.

"She's not going to be happy when she finds out about her boyfriend being dead in our- I mean *your*- alleyway, is she?"

Mr Fotopoulos smiles. "I guess not, but the police are no problem. My bank balance is proof of this."

"But she's friends with that crazy bitch Donna Blazing. *She* could do something unexpected."

"Okay," Mr Fotopoulos says, raising a hand into the air to calm things down. "You find out when and where this English girl Lisa Kite works next. I'll arrange someone to clear up the mess of the Greek in the alley."

Matt watches Mr Fotopoulos cross the road and disappear down the alley at the side of the bar, returning a few moments later with a flurry of winks and smiles before entering the darkness of The British Bulldog bar. Matt checks the bloodstains on his leg that Mr Fotopoulos had indicated. He spits on his fingers and gives the blood a rub. It comes off easy.

He drinks his coffee and thinks about a dream he keeps having where his severed head is a hot air balloon with the loose veins and arteries acting as ropes to suspend the basket below. In the basket there is someone playing bongos, which he presumes to be his heartbeat, and someone burning the gas up inside him in great gushing bursts.

The point of view keeps switching from him actually *being* the balloon and feeling the process take place, to a view where he is observing the situation objectively, from a similarly aerial position. He is always travelling over water and there is always an island in the distance that he can't quite seem to reach. It seems to hang on the horizon, playing peak-a-boo with the curvature of the Earth. Intermittently, there is the sound of a large splash directly below him, but the dream denies him access to these pictures. He can never quite see what has fallen.

Mr Fotopoulos returns to their table outside the café beaming. “Everything is arranged,” he says, “the clean-up people will arrive soon. I tell them we have our own hose-pipe. This makes it cheaper.”

Matt laughs. “What about the plan?”

“Everything is ready. Christos is dealing with the big boys now so I hope he has the stomach for it, you know? It's going to have to be made of iron for what we'll put into it.”

Both men spend a few moments laughing while imagining Christos writhing in agony on the floor, an empty wine glass in his hand. The thoughts give Mr Fotopoulos a shimmering wash of goose pimples. He smiles as he looks at his forearms, picking up the plan and waving its pages around in the air. “Now I feel good. We'll get

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the mess of the Greek in the alley sorted. I'll call the police to smooth things out. Then we'll deal with this Lisa Kite and her crazy friend Donna Blazing. Soon after, I will own all of my brother Christos' business interests and everything he has that was once our father's will be mine."

4

A Conflict Of Interests

I can't sleep.

I do sleep, of course, but only in snatches; only in crippled scenes of dreams where waking is the most desirable end. Every night I'm there, outside The British Bulldog bar, on Kos Island, in the heat and the dark. I come up panting, gasping, before being reclaimed by the bog of my unconscious. I keep the thoughts all locked up in the day, but they come out in the night. So if I do sleep, I sleep the sleep of a lonely wrestler, grappling with the sheets and pillows that make up my ring.

I sometimes feel as if I have missed the chance to ever rest again, and that I shall be forever trapped in this fuse between waking and sleeping, like a zombie who stands at the empty port side for a century, having missed the vital boat.

I don't tell Andy Champion about my troubles, because I'm not telling anyone. Andy Champion is one of the people that Amy Bathe and I are sharing our house with in Southampton. He's an art student like me. He talks through my yawns and baggage handler eyes, showing me his latest creations.

"They're aerial views," he says, "you couldn't really see them

unless you were a bird. It's the helicopter view."

"How do *you* see them then?" I ask him even though I already know the answer.

"Dope," he winks, "I use dope."

Pre-stretched canvas's can be bought for next to nothing but he builds his own, insisting on the *process* being fundamental to the outcome. He even got some pigments at one point during the first year and made his own paint. And despite everyone using the digital suites for their photography, Andy insists on using the antiquated and abandoned darkroom facilities in the department's basement, sloshing chemicals around for hours. It all seems too much like hard work. I tell him this. After tying his long dark hair back into a ponytail, he tells me that all the best laid plans are complex and are multifaceted, like a Picasso.

"*Who?*" I say.

Amy Bathe soon gets together with Craig Sergeant, which is fine. Finishing with her was meant to give me time on my own, to deal with everything that happened over the summer. Time for the froth to sink back into the liquids. The last thing I expected was to fall for someone else. The feelings must have been like a fever with an incubation period, hung-over from the first year; and I didn't even realise I was ill.

I sit with Andy Champion in the college refectory. She enters by the door at the far side. She walks past the shiny aluminium serving hatches. Her reflection is blurred in the scrub polish of their slats. Andy is looking at her as well, craning his neck round in a really obvious way. The problem is that Andy Champion, my friend

and housemate, is *already* in love with her. He has been for ages. He looks back to me, pulling the gawp of his face back together. “You look knackered,” he says, (again) having stopped pretending not to notice.

“Cheers.”

He turns back to her.

“Just *look* at her,” he says, “*what* a babe.”

I try not to. He indicates her by pointing.

“I *see her*”, I hiss, embarrassed for us both.

Back at the house I slump on the sofa in front of the television. Our lounge is a small, impromptu space divided from the kitchen by a virtually non-existent archway, presumably left by builders when the original wall was knocked through. Amy is out at lectures. Andy makes some tea. I have a headache again. The noise and flicker of the television screen makes me feel sleepy. I’m afraid to move just in case I completely wake up.

I slide into a doze, but wake with a start. Andy is sitting in an armchair to the side of the sofa. He points at a cup on the floor by my feet that I can’t see.

“Tea,” he says.

I nod. He stares back at the screen. I close my eyes and begin to slide away, but wake up again with a start.

“What do you think I should do?” he says.

“Do? About what?”

“My *intended*.”

“I don’t know. Ask her out?”

“I’ve tried that, she keeps saying *no*.”

“Well, then maybe she doesn’t want to go out with you.”

Andy looks really pissed off. Then he smiles. Sometimes, despite our being friends, I really can’t figure him out. He huffs out a laugh. “What kind of mate are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I said. What kind of *mate* are you? You’re supposed to be on my side.” He shakes his head in a series of very slow deliberate movements. He begins bouncing one of his legs up and down urgently. His knee nods and nods and nods like its had too much caffeine.

“But I *am* on your side,” I protest, “just think of something else.”

“But *what?*”

“I don’t know.”

He takes a sip of his tea. “Well, whatever,” he says smiling, his tone changed completely, “it doesn’t matter really.”

“Right, well, I’m going for a lie down,” I say, standing quick. The world leans to one side and then straightens itself.

Andy stands up also. He smiles at me apologetically and puts his head on one side. “Look, Oliver, I’m sorry.” He grabs the remote from the arm of his chair and hits the mute.

“About what?”

“You know, about her and stuff. I’m overreacting. I know I’m overreacting. I’m just a bit stressed, you know?”

“Okay.” I’m too tired for this. He’s all right, Andy. But I need to lie down. My head is pounding. I have a weird flickering muscle above my right eye. I rub it and it stops. I make a move towards the

door. The weird flickering muscle starts up again. He stands in the doorway in a way that stops me from going through.

“What?” I ask him, slightly strained.

“You’re not listening.”

“I just need to lie down. I’ve got a headache.”

“Again.”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise.” He bows slightly and stands to one side.

“Okay.” I walk towards the door. He puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Oliver.”

“What?”

“Sleep well, man.” He pats me as I pass.

“Right.”

I walk down the hall and into my room, pulling the duvet around me. I feel sleep nearby in an instant, like the fall of a hunting bird that has circled for hours.

Suddenly I am only an eyeball. A ball of eye, and I am an eyeball living in a shot glass on the shelf behind the bar in The British Bulldog. It is daylight outside. My sphere twists about in the bottom, smarting from the alcoholic residue of previous contents. The bar wraps around the concave curves of the glass. I watch and I listen.

I, or eye, can hear without ears.

The barman and Mr Fotopoulos are arguing, talking, moving about. Mr Fotopoulos keeps asking where Matt Harris is, but the

barman does not know. He tells Mr Fotopoulos that he has seen Ryan and me trying to escape. Mr Fotopoulos bangs his fist down on the bar.

Andy Champion is one of the customers. He spies me high up on the shelf; I know he's going to order me. He does. The barman reaches up for me. Andy's face is all around the glass, distorted and ugly. He's so big and close that he blocks out everything else. His hair is large and loose. He starts talking and telling me to keep my eye to myself, to keep myself to myself, and that he has seen me looking at her, his intended, and that he won't stand for it. I try to turn around, but I'm lodged in the bottom of the glass. Then the glass is tipped and I feel myself sliding into Andy's mouth. I try to close my eye, myself, but I have no lid. I am just an open eye; an eye that cannot be prevented from looking or seeing or feeling. Just as Andy closes his mouth behind me I hear a distraught Mr Fotopoulos, shouting out Matt's name.

5

Mr Fotopoulos Gets The Message

“*Matt?*” Mr Fotopoulos calls from his apartment above The British Bulldog bar. “You down there?”

He receives no answer.

It is the morning after Ryan Longstory and his brother Oliver experienced their difficulties with the Greek boys outside The Union Jack bar in Kos town. They are currently on route to the port, nervously hoping to catch a ferry and escape the island.

Mr Fotopoulos calls again, more urgently this time. “*Matt!*”

“It’s me,” the barman calls up, his voice shaking, still thinking about the phone call he has just taken.

“Who’s me?”

“James.”

“You seen Matt?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Mr Fotopoulos’ footsteps creak back and forth upon the floor above. The bar is closed. The fridges that are supposed to be being re-stocked are still half empty; the dishwasher crammed full of last night’s dirty glasses.

Because of the phone call.

James Red thinks about the news that he has just received, and tries to imagine the scenes described to him in such detail. It was news that he was now responsible for, and it was news that his boss, Mr Stefanos Fotopoulos, was definitely not going to like.

Most of the talking was done by the person on the other end. It is not so much a conversation as a relay of information; a baton of facts stuffed firmly down the line and on through into the centre of his brain. James Red feels his stomach start to cave in as Mr Fotopoulos enters from the stairwell at the back of the bar, still wiping sleep from his moustache.

“This rain,” Mr Fotopoulos says, sauntering, making gestures with his hands, “this rain insults my business.”

“There was a call. A few minutes ago, here.”

Mr Fotopoulos perks up. “A call from who? Matt?”

“No. It was Lisa Kite.”

“Lisa Kite, the girlfriend of the dead Greek in the alley?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Well, what did this Lisa Kite have to say?”

“Something about the police-”

“Pah! The police don’t blame me for the Greek in the alley?”

Mr Fotopoulos laughs, relaxing. “It’s already sorted, I already talked to them. Nicko and Dimitri Bouboulinas. Good brothers. I pay the wages for them in this town, so they blame me for nothing but their good living.”

“She said, not this time. She said that she’d seen the- *body*- and that the police would have to investigate and prosecute because

of his- *nationality.*” James Red swallows. Dry moves over dryness.

Mr Fotopoulos pauses. *Oh no*, he thinks, *not...* “Matt?”

James Red flinches and nods his agreement urgently.

“So Lisa Kite and Donna Blazing have killed Matt in revenge for him killing the Greek in the alley boyfriend who snoops for the plan, and now they want to put the blame on me! What about the English boys, the friends of Matt who stay with him, who work up in the Agora last night, at The Union Jack?”

“I saw them earlier this morning, back packs on their backs, heading in the direction of the port.”

“Did they come from Matt’s apartment?”

James pauses.

Mr Fotopoulos rubs his moustache with an urgent finger, “Well?” he demands, “did they come from the apartment or not?”

“They *looked* like they’d come from the beach.”

“The Christos boys want to hit back for the Greek in the alley, and they mistake one of the English new boys for Matt. I wanted to take them with me- in the car. Find these Christos Greeks and take revenge for their revenge. I tell them I can supply the knives. But when the car turns up- they’ve disappeared. Me and the old boys rode around but we couldn’t find these Christos Greeks. I don’t know where they could have been hiding! And these new English boys- they insult my business by not coming along. And now you say they leave? How long ago did you see them?”

“About ten minutes ago, but the next boat doesn’t leave until three this afternoon, if that’s where they’re heading.”

Mr Fotopoulos stands. “*Of course* that’s where they’re

heading. Where else would they go? Right. Make the call, describe these escaping English and send the boys round to the port.”

Mr Fotopoulos pushes the phone across the bar towards him.

James stares at it, aghast. “The boys with *knives*?”

“No, no, no. The boys with *kicks*, and make sure you tell them *English*. Last time I send them they beat up *Australians*. It’s rude for them to leave in this way. They insult my business by not providing me with good notice for me to arrange the staffing rota. I want those English in the Kos town hospital where I can visit them at my leisure. I want to know what they saw. I want to see if they know anything about Lisa Kite and Donna Blazing who try to blame me for the murder of Matt- the murder *they* commit in revenge for the Greek in the alley.”

6

Health And Safety

Suzy Farfalla groans and clutches her head. We are all stood in the kitchen. Andy Champion, Amy Bathe, Suzy Farfalla and me. Suzy Farfalla is the fourth person in our house share.

She met Amy Bathe during their first year in halls. I remember asking her what course she did when we were first introduced. She told me that she tore books to pieces. I asked her whether this was to save her having to read them.

Still muttering about paracetamol, she rummages in the chaos of kitchen cupboards fitted above the sink. They creak irritably at her rough handling, and Amy warns her about one of the doors, which is close to coming off.

Suzy pauses, clutching her pharmaceutical prize. “I can’t understand it; I only had a couple of glasses of wine.”

Andy laughs. “You had more than that.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah. You did.”

Amy is huffing and puffing wordlessly, holding a glass of water out for Suzy. “I think we’ve got a problem,” she says. Her eyes whip to meet all three of us. “Well, we’ve *all* had these headaches,

haven't we?"

Suzy swallows her pills. "Even if drink is contributing to them, they're still a lot worse than they should be, and they feel different from drink headaches, they feel weird."

"Here speaks a headache connoisseur," says Andy.

Amy points at the central heating boiler, hung up on the wall next to the sink units. "I was thinking about *that*."

There is a moment where we all stand staring, trying to make the link. The kettle boils and its switch clicks. Suzy takes a sip from her water. Somewhere outside in the distance, a dog barks.

"Carbon Monoxide?" I say.

Amy nods, indicating its ramshackle condition. "Just look at this." She walks over to and puts a finger onto the grey blotches of deposit situated near its ventilation pipe.

"Wouldn't we be able to *smell* it or something?" I say.

"Apparently not. It's invisible in every way. People just go to bed and wake up dead in the morning; or rather they don't wake up at all. Just to be on the safe side, I've bought one of these little carbon monoxide tester kits." She holds it up. Everyone looks. "We can put it next to the boiler. That should tell us whether or not there's a problem."

An hour later, we reconvene.

The original tan brown colour of the tester circle has turned a thick, fatal shade of black. This, according to the diagrammatic instructions on the packet, is the worst result imaginable. It advises we contact the person who is responsible for servicing the boiler. We all look at one another hopelessly.

Singh.

Mr Singh, our landlord.

“Well, we’re dead then, aren’t we?” Suzy says.

“It’s serious. It says victims of such poisoning may initially suffer flu-like symptoms including nausea, fatigue and *headaches*.”

I look over at the tester circle, the bearer of our bad tidings. I think about it being like an eye that we have invited in to oversee our deaths. I start finding it hard to look away. I take a couple of steps back and to the side, but the paranoid darkness of its pupil follows me confidently.

I think about how death follows people and how the death of Matt Harris in Greece has followed me. I think about how it has crept like dampness through the walls of my dreaming. His death now looks through the eye of the carbon monoxide tester circle.

Suzy speculates sarcastically as to whether Singh’s involvement might make it possible for the tester circle to become blacker than it already is.

“What about hiring someone ourselves to check it out?” I suggest. “Someone without spurred boots, a tasselled waistcoat, and a ten gallon hat, that is.”

“Can’t afford it.” Andy says.

“Well, *something* is going to have to be done,” says Amy.

Singh turns up later looking amiable enough, but with his wallet firmly stapled shut. We point him in the direction of the boiler itself, though he insists he had glasses with him when he left his house.

He dismisses the tester circle as a gimmick with his usual

mixture of head-shaking smiles and stuttered English. He even suggests that we might have coloured in the circle with a felt tip pen ourselves, in order to get him to pay out for a new central heating system.

He wrestles for nearly five minutes with the boilers stubborn white metal cover before gaining access to its sensitive areas. After a brief inspection, he says that it looks almost new to him.

“But you haven’t got your *glasses*,” Amy says.

Singh’s toolbox consists of a single hammer, which he allows to dangle loosely at his side while he talks, its claw nicking intermittently at the seams of his overalls. He bangs away at the boiler randomly until satisfied.

Amy tells him that he’ll see no rent until a proper engineer comes and makes a qualified assessment of the problem.

We all nod.

Singh waves his hammer in the air.

We all stop nodding.

Singh departs in a rage.

We put up another tester circle. An hour later, it is as black as the first. We all stand and stare at the boiler, murdering us by default with its inanimate bronchitis.

“Imagine it when they find us,” Suzy says.

“*Us?*” Amy says, “we’re not all going to die *together* are we? No, we’ll be finding each other.”

The girls stand around with the appearance of people who are running scenarios of morbid discovery through their heads. I notice the side by side eyes of the tester circles, looking blackly vacuous. I

Social Wallpaper by portersteve (10k sampler)

follow their stereo gaze out into the room. They seem to be focused upon Suzy. I move my eyes back and forth between them; Suzy and the tester circles. I walk over to the boiler and extinguish the calm blue of its pilot light, putting the sharp head of its arrow to sleep.

7

Doubts About Andy

By the third week of term, my sleeping patterns are virtually back to normal. One night I dream about finding Andy hanging from the washing line pole in the garden. The girls and I try in vain to get him down, but the pole just seems to get taller as we scabble, keeping his body out of our reach. He comes to life and tosses handfuls of blackened carbon monoxide tester circles down to us, laughing as his pockets overflow.

When I see him the next day he winks at me in a way that suggests he knows all about the dream. He carries his bags through into the hallway and tells me he is going home to Cornwall for the weekend.

Despite all of Andy's bravado, I can't help feeling that something is going horribly wrong behind the scenes. He hasn't been right since we moved in.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine right *now*," he grins and winks. "But who knows? The future is suffocated by the present and then contaminated by the past. It's all a myth. A carrot on a stick to keep us motivated."

I stand, winded by his words. Stoned nonsense, of course. But

he could have just said *fine*.

He watches my gradual comprehension of what he has said carefully, quizzically even. Then he laughs. “Joke! Only a joke. There’s surfing to be done.”

“Suffering?”

“*Surfing!*”

“Oh.”

“There is a slight difference. Now can we stop this introspective bullshit and get on with it?”

“Sure. Sorry.”

“You really do need to chill out.”

“I know.”

I watch his taxi turn out into the road in front of our house, and speed off in the direction of the railway station. I feel confused by his performance. Is he really fine or simply exaggerating himself to prove the point?

On Monday, an A5-sized brown envelope arrives, with its rear panel made of cardboard. It has *Do Not Bend* printed in large red letters above the address, and a thickly inked Cornwall postmark creeps over the Queen’s head in one corner. One of the wavy black lines is printed just below her nose, and looks like a moustache. The handwritten address consists of sweeping, ornamental loops, of the type produced by a finely-nibbed fountain pen. We all stand in kitchen. I hold the envelope. The girls look at me.

“Open it then,” Suzy says, gathering the hair together on one side of her head to make a plait.

I stare at the envelope, and wonder if I am about to unseal

details of a tragedy. People who kill themselves often leave notes by way of explanation; a final, concise and unquestionable rendering of feelings.

By the time you read this I will be gone...

“Come on!” says Amy. I know the girls are slightly suspicious of his behaviour as well. *Concerned*, would be more accurate. It’s hard to identify exactly what it is about him, but this lack of identification only seems to add to our conviction that there is *something* wrong.

I rip back the envelopes flap, poke the tips of my fingers inside, and pull out the contents. It is a letter, but it seems to have been composed on the back of a photograph. I look at the image briefly, but can’t quite make out what it is supposed to be. It’s very dark and underexposed.

“Well?” Suzy says, while Amy stares intently.

“It says, *Dear Suzy*: it’s for you.” I go to hand it over.

“Just read it,” she says.

I start to read: *By the time you read this I will be...* I stop and look up at them. The colour must drain out of me. I look back down to the letter...*surfing with my friends while you get ready for lectures.*

The entire room seems to sigh with relief, although it could just have been me.

He is *surfing*, not *suffering*.

I text him but he does not reply. I call him but his phone is off.

That night I dream the same dream of looking out of the kitchen window to find him hanging from the washing line pole in the garden.

This time I go out into the garden and start to run towards him but the path seems to get longer and longer and the harder I run the further away he seems to be. After what seems like hours, I stop, exhausted. I look at him still hanging there from the pole, and his head lifts up from its limpness and he opens his eyes and smiles. I turn around to run back to the house but the pole has moved and blocks my way. I run in different directions but it always seems to be in front of me. My gaze is just fixed on him and I can't move my head away and I can't stop running and this time I seem to get closer and closer and our eyes are locked and his face just keeps on smiling. Then his face disappears. His eyes seal up and his mouth grows over, the nose sinking back into his head. For a few seconds he is faceless, a featureless, barren planet. Then new features appear. A mouth forms as if cut from inside, eyes press and bulge from behind skin and then open and a nose grows, pulling all of the other features together into the thin, spiteful face of Matt Harris.