



Dances

I was awake in what felt like an instant, a ray of sunlight splitting my head in half. Mom out of sight, I showered, redressed, packed my wet sheets into a bag, began to panic, and called her to see if I had it in me to tell her what was going on. In the few seconds between her picking up and my coldly demanding, *Where are you?* I decided to give myself the benefit of the doubt until the test. Outside the laundromat, I studied its manual, slid the swab deep into my nostrils, its tip into the liquid, and anxiously waited the fifteen recommended minutes while staring vacantly into the dryer porthole as it got increasingly encrusted with a disturbing white film. When I looked back down at the test, a faint second line was obviously apparent.

The ride to the port was spent in our usual silence. Mom's only interruption, to ask if I had finally checked the website for the cruise we were about to embark on, came as a good excuse to look at my phone, face pointed more consistently away from her and out towards the window. The ad was framed by blue and white variations of corinthian columns, evidently geared towards tourists; this much I had expected, accustomed in time to mom's capacity to fetishise the picturesque in all cultures, including our own. I skimmed the text and swiped down to an image gallery of a mother who looked eerily like my own in front of various beaches, olive trees, and donkeys, pausing to turn back to her and make sure it wasn't just the fever fogging my senses, to see a self-satisfied smile plastered on her face. *It looks beautiful doesn't it?*

The taxi dropped us off a couple hundred meters away from the dock. Although small, this stretch took us an excruciating amount of time to trudge; due in part to my own hesitation in going through with the whole thing, but mostly mom's habit of walking at an unhurried, almost geriatric pace she attributed to her diagnosis with a rare autoimmune disease, but I suspected had more to do with her recent self-imposed mental and physical shift into an old woman. Each of the three times she had visited me in Athens, different facets of her younger personality had all but completely eroded, a fact she was stubbornly unaware of to the point that when I mentioned them to her it was as if they never even existed, the image of her I had grown up with replaced in her mind by a more generic idea of what a young mother might be.

Onboard, we were met by two deckhands in miss-matched costumes: a man imitating a revolutionary soldier from our independence in the 1800s, and a woman in a chiton, a toga-like dress worn in ancient Greece. Mom was quick to mention how beautiful it was—to the woman's surprise in Greek. She kindly thanked her and then asked if we would like our picture taken with them, the cameraman interrupting to mention it would come at an additional cost. As the four of us stood there shoulder to shoulder the cameraman suddenly shouted, *Smile, we've got four generations of Greeks in this one!* and took the shot.

Mom was quick to find the only other group of Greeks on deck, latching onto them for long enough for me to settle my nerves and concentrate on the practicalities of hiding my escalating symptoms. I broke off and stood by the railing to catch some of the sea spray and cool my fever. A couple hours went by, I felt a pat on my back: mom had an announcement to make. Maria, a friend she was supposed to be staying with after we got back, was ill. My immediate reaction, to ask why the hell she was having coffee with her this morning then was cut short by a cough I managed to contain in my mouth, blowing it out at the sea as I briefly considered telling her I was also, before blurting out, *You can stay with me, don't worry.* She thanked me, reached out to me, I flinched, and then let go, allowing her to embrace me. Over her shoulder, I looked out onto the ocean, felt a wave of anger rising and welcomed it, wanting it to overwhelm my panic.

For lunch, I made sure we sat at a table on the sun deck where I could smoke, covering up the occasional cough with the pretext of a dry throat. Mom had barely touched her food, when I provoked her into a monologue about a new diet she was on. *You know it would be healthier for you if you finally started exercising*, I interrupted. *Oh would you stop, you know I never liked exercising, some people like it and some don't, it's not for everyone and the condition makes everything harder and there's nothing I can do about that*. Before I managed to reply, a waiter came to collect our plates, and asked us to join the rest of the passengers inside for a showcase of traditional Greek dances. Although seemingly enthralled by the idea, mom insisted she also have a smoke before following me in. Watching her infuriatingly drag each inhale and exhale, I got up, quipped, *You know when you do that, it's like if I pulled out a bag of heroin and shot it right here in front of you*, and stormed off into the atrium on my own.

The room was stacked with clusters of tourists I could vaguely organise by the similarity of their clothes and ages, was decorated with arching vines and olive branches, and the couple that greeted us at the entrance had seemingly multiplied, both in numbers and variations of time-period and local; the out-of-placeness I felt amongst them came as an unusual comfort, their genericness creating a clarity from which I could more easily disassociate myself from my reality; I considered that maybe it was this feeling that appealed to mom in her own transformation, and for a moment, it even felt as if we were all in on a broader lie together.

Three middle aged men in skirts and vests pushed their way into the centre of the room, mom and I now sat between two elderly couples at the edge of it where an opening was left for us to view them through the crowd. As the music started playing – opa's sounding off-beat from the tables – I began to fixate on how sweaty the dancers' hair and faces seemed, unable to put together if they had been this way from the moment they arrived on stage. I ran my fingers through my own, tracing beads of sweat rolling down the back of my ear; under the scorching sun of the midday heat, this could have looked normal, but I had been in this air conditioned room long enough now to have dried out. I told mom I needed another cigarette, rushed outside, down to a lower deck, into a bathroom, where I put my head under the sink, replacing my sweat with a stream of fresh water, and dried off using an enormous amount of paper towels.

Peeking through a window at the dancers throwing their legs up half-way to the ceiling, for the first time the urgency of my circumstances truly surfaced. It would be impossible for me to keep going in this state. I noticed mom in the crowd behind them, from my vantage she seemed to be holding her head in her hands. Worried, I rushed to meet her in our seats, where she was sobbing alone, the people surrounding her mildly concerned but too awkward to do anything about it. Wanting to comfort her more privately, I tried picking her up from her armpits to guide her outside, but her weight sank fully into my arms. Through panting breaths she insisted it was nothing and to leave her be. I lowered myself down to my knees and quietly asked her what had happened. Her gaze still fixed on those men, she replied, *I used to be able to dance those dances*.