

2002

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Twenty minutes after the cruise company's van nosed into the parking lot outside Crete's famous ruin at Knossos, Cally slipped out of King Minos' palace, away from her tour. The other eight people on the catamaran were couples—English, German, American, no other Canadians—boyfriends or husbands and their girlfriends or wives glancing at each other seductively, or at her furtively, questioning, pitying, pretending not to notice this morning as she snuck an orange and a napkin-wrapped bun stuffed with bacon and cheese into her bag at breakfast. (Lunch was not included.) She found a bench in the shade of a plane tree by the entrance kiosk. Birds twittered in the branches above her, a rose-scented breeze stroked her cheek. She did not notice.

A stupid reconstruction, that's what Knossos was, one Englishman's vision of what the ancient Minoans had built, the truth of it gone. Irretrievably.

Like her mother—face, nails, hair carefully coloured—back home her mother had always been too busy showing a house, making a sale, sealing a deal, to sit chatting over a cup of tea with her daughter. Home was ringing phones, dinners forgotten,

## CALLY'S WAY

smiles guilty, attention already flown. Whenever she had asked about her mother's childhood in Crete, all she got was: "I don't remember. I was very little when we left."

Not true, apparently. One night, a week before her mother died, Cally had noticed that her wedding rings were no longer on her mother's ring finger. Her father had been gone for years, but her mother never took the rings off. So where were they? The nurses, who tended her mother during the day while Cally was at university, would not have taken them. She searched a secret compartment in the back of a shallow drawer built into the moulding around the top of her mother's dressing table. A private, forbidden place. The sliding lid stuck. Wriggling a finger in under it, she felt a folded paper and, flattening it, released a full-colour "Cruise to Crete" pamphlet: tanned people lazing on a catamaran moored below a whitewashed mountainside chapel. The rings were taped to a patch of sky, her mother's handwriting below them shaky: "For Cally."

Oh, Mom. She searched the brochure, but there was nothing more.

Her mother's hospital bed had been set up in the living room. The curtains were drawn, the lamp beside the easy chair casting a soft glow. Her mother's eyes were closed, their lids papery in the lamplight. The last dose of morphine must have kicked in. The skin on which she had spent thousands of dollars sagged over her cheekbones as the cancer fed itself. But maybe she had not yet drifted into sleep. Cally leaned close, smelled the sweetness of drugs and decay on the wisp of her breath.

Please Mom, she wanted to cry, talk to me! Just this once. Give me something, a fact, a memory, anything, to hold onto.

Instead she just held her mother's vein-blue hand. Inside it the cells gathered their energies, communicating, gaining power until, sometime after midnight, the hand spoke. Its tremor, slight

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as a movement of air, woke Cally out of a doze. Her mother's eyes were closed but she thought she saw her lips quiver, shaping sound.

"I'm right here, Mom." She leaned closer. "What did you say?"

I love you.

Three words, towering, life affirming. Twenty-five years of need erased in an instant.

If her mother had uttered them.

Or, in her exhaustion, afraid and alone, had Cally turned incoherent mumbling into meaning?

Her mother's mouth fell open, into sleep. There was no way to know.

Cally picked up the telephone. Snee, her best friend since grade school, would still be up.

"Of course she loves you, dummy. Think about it: if her intention was to thank you for looking after her, the brochure would have been for somewhere close, the Bahamas, or Jamaica. But no, she wants you to go halfway around the world, to know the place she came from."

Why? Cally looked up into the plane tree's shivering leaves. What could it matter now? Pain deep inside her threatened to shake loose something she had not even known was there.

A rack of brochures beside the entrance kiosk advertised seaside hideaways, mountain hikes through meadows full of orchids. Getting up to look at them, she paid no attention to the yellow Fiat pulling up to the curb, or to the middle-aged man who unfolded himself from the driver's side and came around the car into the plane tree's shade. He tapped a cigarette out of its package.

"You like to visit the real *Kriti*?" Smiling, pointing at the pamphlets, he appraised her capris and sun hat. The name of a travel agency was stencilled on the door of the Fiat.

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“No, no. Thank you.” She dredged up a smile. He had a kind face.

He ducked his head to light the cigarette and smoked for a while.

“This Plakias,” he said, nodding at the brochure she was holding, “is very beautiful, on the south coast. Away from this.” He waved toward the fleet of tourist buses in the parking lot. “I have an office there.” He was driving down tomorrow morning. “You can visit the real *Kríti* from Plakias.”

“No,” she told him again. “I can’t. I’m on a cruise around the island and I only have three days.”

The travel agent shrugged.

“Three days is forever. I charge you only the bus rate and two nights in the Plakias hotel, very cheap this early in April.”

Out in the parking lot a whistle blew. Her cruise mates homed in on it and began to climb into the van that would bounce back up the highway to yet another group dinner and dance, the boyfriends and husbands taking turns with her, sliding a hand down her back—

“We will drive back to Heraklion in time for you to catch your plane home.”

Not home. There was no home now. Her flight would be to New York, to start her first job. She was alone now in a world where American-hating madmen flew planes into sky scrapers, where bombs or anthrax or cancer could gobble a life, if not today then very possibly tomorrow.

She looked at the name on the side of the Fiat. It was advertised on billboards by the highway and at the hotel. And imagine the freedom of three days with no one but herself to care for, or answer to, or think about—

No. The cruise was paid for—

The agent glanced at his watch and then at her.

## JANE BOW

Take the opportunity or leave it. Have an adventure or don't. Stay cautious, closeted in her bunk on the catamaran, or drive south with a total stranger, through flower-filled pastures punctuated by thin, priest-like cypresses and these graceful plane trees, deep into the mountains whose outlines she can see on the horizon. Into the land that her mother might have known.