WHAT YOU COULD HAVE WON

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Rachel Genn

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A space must be maintained or desire ends.

EROS THE BITTERSWEET, ANNE CARSON

I try to keep her on a short leash.
I try to calm her down.
I try to ram her into the ground, yeah.

SEETHER, VERUCA SALT

CONTENTS

Antiparos **9**
Box Set **17**
Zoot **30**
Picnic (No Picnic) **33**
BirdBoy **44**
Under the Dreamers **53**
The Kissing **64**
Box Set II **74**
Quit Mooning over Nefertiti **78**
Plydo **87**
Dilpa **101**
U Heart Eppendorf **114**
Donut **127**
Silk Burns Quickly in the Desert **140**
Despotiko **147**
Self-Class **154**
He Wants Me **168**
Finally, Nudes **180**
How to Beat a Dwarf **188**
Dwell Time **201**
La Luna **209**
Fire **219**

ANTIPAROS

Up to now, I have only noted decisions that are poor to extremely poor and/or seem to be defences against shame. From the cafeteria, I can see down to the beach: framed by the rendered arch to the café's terrace, her rectangular shelter by the shore is flapping in the wind. It is made up of a faded, jungle-patterned sheet stretched between four bamboo sticks secured in the sand, and stands twelve inches above her face. In that face, by now, the teeth will be chattering in the heat. Only yards from her, the main knot of Greeks are setting up volleyball, laughing in short barks because it is still early. They were up very late. There he is again, pulling himself from the sea, which makes me switch my eyes to the floor though no one can see me from there. I look toward him again and he is dragging his heel forcefully back through the sand to mark the boundaries of the court.

In the corner of the cold cabinet, there is a doughnut with a panther-pink glaze and I know that it has been put out for her. The doughnut has a cold sweat on it – an idiot among the metal saucers of tzatziki. If she sees it she will be positive that they can get to her even in the Cyclades. I have told her that being positive is dangerous, that there's always room for doubt in the mentally healthy; she becomes positive very easily since Burning Man, though the tendency has been there since the beginning. I have not mentioned the video once this morning.

It's clear that this place exists for the best-looking people from the capital. Athenians, in the main, are taut and deep brown and much taller than I imagined. From the shade in the café, I can get a good look at them down at the shore and I capture and hold on to a flash of small brown breasts. I get to admire the sheen on the torsos of these first weekenders from the mainland and feel that my eyes deal with them in fistfuls. I will make a note of that. They are forever emerging from the sea after swimming back and forth to the scrubby little island she calls Dilpa, two hundred yards from our shore. They are into coolly communicating jokes to each other: they like to quip quickly and make an appreciative moan rather than laugh openly; the handyman in particular makes laughter seem foolish. They drink frappés up to midnight. When not swimming or having faraway parties after sunset (where they laugh openly and often), these people are limbering, ankle-deep in sand. Apart from one, the men are colossal and unperturbed by deep water, large insects or the extreme heat. My skin is much fairer than theirs. I have tried nudity, but prefer to wear shorts.

He's coming to serve me as I knew he would, and I turn from the doughnut to feta with fried courgettes plus dill. I pay him and smile but he treats me impatiently, then slams the till and runs back out to the game. There are more players now. The arch is filling up and there's a new arrival to the group. At first I thought him a child but no, too hairy. A dwarf then? Whoever it is gets a hold of the Handyman fondly enough to be family, but I don't imagine that this handyman is related to a dwarf. A stick-thin woman with white-blonde hair follows the Handyman and hugs him from behind then takes a moment to twirl his long curls with both hands and finally, nips his cheeks. She shouts out a rousing slogan (in what? French? Hebrew? Dutch?) that clearly ends in 'Gigi' at

which the Handyman bows deeply, holding his hand palm out towards the dwarf. 'Gigi' cannot be his name and so must be a name for the dwarf. A pet name. Here come some dirty blondes, probably Swedes, perhaps brothers, and they join in with their preparations for the game, bouncing hard and high like Maasai which is not easy in sand. They have a caramel-to-toffee tan that brags 'here for the season,' and are lithe and I measure their dicks against the other volleyballers'. It's a matter of habituation: a few more days and I will not do this anymore. I can talk my eyes out of it.

The Handyman is the centre of everything round here, carrying armfuls of drainage pipes or sides of meat wrapped in light blue cloth and newspaper, watering basil and oregano that thrive in gasoline canisters painted red, gold and green and kept in the scarce shade of the terrace walls. He has no idea that I have watched him perforate a basil leaf in a series of curves with the white shell of his nail then smell his fingers, then rub his fingers through his hair. He keeps the rustic showers pristine with a comically small squeegee. I whistle when I go into a stall. He polishes everything he passes with the cloth that wraps the meat. Gigi cannot be his name, which is why I am happy to apply it as a nickname for now.

There is a party on this island that we are not yet part of. I hear it. It starts with one lonely hide-beater and builds. Nothing so crass as a flyer, an invite or any evidence, though they have MTV and knew who she was the moment she arrived. Dilpa is where it's at: the smaller, rockier island that I can see but only they can swim to. There is one ferryman and a row-boat, who disappears between his daily crossings but before he does, thinks nothing of stunning octopus on the side of his boat (the sound, a meaty *Hank*) and firing the black ink in an arc so wide that we sunbathers sit up.

For me and her, island life had rapidly become isolating. When night comes, while the real party heats up somewhere else, we sit in a ghost camp where I am encouraged to agree with her take on why we are so good for each other. I am expected to flow with her high, while she explains how the timing of her album was exactly right; I wonder if she thinks that talking about how we are together constitutes our togetherness, that if she shut up about us we'd be repulsed by what we found us to be. I say nothing, just listen, as she points to evidence that means she is still being followed by cameras. If I try to locate the distant music, or look for clues as to where it might be coming from, she insists that I get closer to her to judge a melody or listen to repeats of verses (commitment is never being bored). On her visits to the camp bathroom, I get to see him polishing the laundry troughs in what look like his party clothes. I am instructed to wait for her under the lamp outside, where she rejoins me in a crisp cone of light, thick with insects, confessing, 'I really can't believe that I only want you.' Later, I will suggest less kissing.

The slide began before we got here. In Athens, a couple of strangers had recognised her on the street so that on the ferry from Paros, all she wanted to do was play Zoot/Not Zoot (a title I coined, but now regret).

Sitting on deck, she sensed my reluctance to play.

'Hey! You evil cuz this canary such a fine dinner?'

'Can't we take a rest from it?' I said, tilting my chin at the sun.

At this, her headscarf (it's old and it's French), her glasses, her cigarette, all quivered. She overdid everything for the rest of the ferry ride: telling a staring passenger to fuck off, to gain my approval. As we approached the modest grey-green hump

of Antiparos on the trawler, she performed an exaggerated running man. Since we started the Box Set she thinks she's Adriana La Cerva. *The Sopranos* has a lot to answer for. This lack of inhibition will need monitoring.

From the jetty, we took a wide dirt track that headed from the unmarked harbour through bristly dunes on an incline towards a campsite and, having been there before, she couldn't contain her enthusiasm: 'Now ain't dat barrelhouse?'

'Granted,' I said, taking in the view of a shallow bight of sand edged by green waters, punctuated by a smaller wild-looking island across a lagoon. We entered under a bleached sign for The Camping Antiparos and walked towards an unlit cabin with peeling turquoise paint, which seemed to have office status; through the window a wall calendar advertised ventilation ducting. I predicted a couple of days and we'd have to get out of here.

Gigi was the first person we saw. From behind the cabin he appeared with a piece of cream cheesecloth wrapped around his waist, a short kilt making his skin look black in the dusk. Standing with his legs apart like a wrestler, feet turned out and hands on hips. He carried a compact generator and up close, smelled of sweat and pine cleaning fluid.

She pointed to the sign while staring at the generator. 'Are you maintenance?'

'You need hat,' he replied, seriously.

'I don't think so,' she said.

'Bamboo hat!'

She looked to me.

'Who's the Greek here?' I chuckled.

'No hat!' he shouted, pulling my hand from my crown. 'Hat!' He pointed to a row of small bamboo enclosures that stood in a row along the edge of the campground.

'Huts!' she cried, clapping her hands, as he went over and opened a rickety door constructed from odd lengths of old bamboo strapped together with binding. Inside was a six-foot-square corral and behind these huts were the boundaries to the camp, live bamboo thickets hissing in the breeze.

'In here, you can sleep, two-fifty drachma.'

'We have a tent,' I said, swinging the nylon pod round to my chest and patting its bulk.

We were given a pitch. Before I had even hammered in the pegs, she had begun her routines, but I immediately noticed the insistence of a beat and became distracted by the faraway noise of a good deal of people. The tent was up just as the sun set and I heard a switch in the distance, from a lone drummer to faint music. Every so often, voices lilted in consensus, and I caught a Greek hooray at something unexpected. The tents around us were empty. She didn't find this mysterious at all and intermittently sang into my face or did an English accent to coax me back to her. She drank the last of the ouzo then demanded the bag again. It wasn't all I had brought but I did not tell her as she is incapable of leaving so much as a salting. While she went to the bathrooms, I noted the mg/kg ratio in the book.

So it was no surprise that our first morning started unevenly. The Handyman arrived outside the tent as I, after struggling through anemones of silk scarves to reach the air, had just suggested a blaming pathology. From inside she shouted that if we didn't fucking arrive late to every fucking campsite we would know where the fucking shade was going to be for the fucking morning. I smiled at him and he shook his head. Without warning, he pulled out our tent pegs in strong smooth movements, helped her from the tent and removed our bags. With the tent emptied, he hooked two fingers around the strut, picked it up by its frame, and toyed with it to highlight

its handiness, placing it finally in an empty patch of shade. When he left, we fucked. Something about the shaded heat of the tent and the inescapable stink of pine made it compulsory. I told her the heat put me off kissing, still, she tried to kiss me (NB: impulsivity to compulsivity).

Already, my favourite part of this camp is the cafeteria. If he isn't in his seat at the till, I find myself scanning the beach or scouring the shallow bay for him. I know she won't come out of her shelter. When paranoid, she waits until I say something she wants to hear. I had already told her this morning that a fresh start is always just around the corner but she called me a smug motherfucking yard dog who's just as needy as she is. Instead of analysing why she demolished the remains of the stash from Piraeus, she began acting as if it were always her intention to be well and truly rid of it. The inevitability of failure sits at the back of all this but today she looks blithely forward, talking the talk (the newly abstinent adore hyperbole – *This is the easiest!* – etc.) while I predict that by mid-afternoon there could be a catastrophic failure of will. Before then, there will be the breakdown in decision-making (possible chapter titles: 'Does it hurt to choose?' / 'Why it hurts to choose'). I could tell her that in some respects addicts want the regret, that they are longing for longing, only satisfied when there is nowhere else to go. This is the crux of my book: the very key to *How Cocaine Can Break Your Brain* is that regret is an integral part of the addiction machine. I am gathering evidence.

Making my way back toward the beach, my tray balances a cup and a frappé. The glass is tall and creaks with ice. She asked for coffee but I have a mint tea for her that will help her feel less unstable. My feet are burning, though no one on the beach would know. I check Gigi dividing his glances fairly between the volleyball and her shelter. A smart breeze lifts up the flap of the cloth coffin and I see the chocolate-dark

corona around her nipple and my head swings to the Greeks and there he is again, looking, waiting. His colour matches hers. If only he knew that their little superstar was oiled up and nude under the sheet.

I put the tray down beside the sheet.

'You should offer yourself to him,' I say.

I take up my book then find the paper I need, 'Degraded Decision-Making in Long-Term Cocaine Users', from an up-and-coming Italian group. She squints through the flap at the ruffling pages of my maths notebook and I flick a look at the pages to see what she might have seen.

'Psychiatrists do it with squares,' she says.

I pull the book beside me in the sand, just in case.

'Do I look over your shoulder when you're writing songs?'

She blurts a laugh, 'You couldn't write a song,' and I am disgusted at how convinced she is of this.

RACHEL GENN is a neuroscientist, artist and writer who has written two novels: *The Cure* (2011) and *What You Could Have Won* (2020). She was a Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence (2016), creating The National Facility for the Regulation of Regret, which spanned installation art, VR and film (2016–17). She has written for *Granta*, *3:AM Magazine*, and *Hotel*, and is working on *Hurtling*, a hybrid collection of essays about the neuroscience, art and abjection of artistic reverie. She's also working on a binaural experience exploring paranoia, and a collection of non-fiction about fighting and addiction to regret. Genn works at the Manchester Writing School and the School of Digital Arts, both at Manchester Metropolitan University, and lives in Sheffield.