

JAI CLARE

THE LIGHTEST BLUE

THREE ROLLS OF USED FILM sit on a grubby white bedspread, where they've been for the last six hours, not shifting an inch since my girlfriend Jude left the hotel room. Even though I've dropped clumsily onto the bed a number of times, they haven't moved; they cling tightly to each other in the center space, like compatriots. I barely contain the urge to hurl them around the room.

Instead I have been amused by crass Greek adverts on the TV while I've emptied my room bar. First Red Bull and Pimms, and now I am liberally drowning in *retsina*, which is revolting. It stinks of mold, of sharp pine, like loo cleaner. While it's liberating being drunk alone, the room feels restless as if it can't wait to be rid of me and reeks of toiletries — lavender room spray and lemon disinfectant — and Jude's expensive perfume. I haven't eaten since this morning's rolls. The immensity of the space is frightening. Without her the room and the city feel monstrous.

Footsteps in the passage, clinking heels. She has tiny feet. Of course these particular feet walk away past my door and I feel like a stupid fool for hoping that she has returned, a fool who puts his trust in people.

It occurs to me, suddenly and with frightening certainty, that of course she must have had an accident. What is scary about this is the relief it brings, nullifying my fool status. She will be lying in a hospital but at least I am not a fool. I am not a fool.

The room, as wide as the QE2, sways as I stand up quickly, the window latch opens; air and car noises rush in. Papers flurry in motion like frenzied snow. I trip over a can of Red Bull, which rolls beneath the bed. The room slides; my feet rock, legs buckle. I feel suddenly old. Through fluttering curtains something blue, almost fragile, flicks through the air, landing delicately on a roll of film. A dragonfly in the lightest color of blue hangs there. The blue looks as if it will fade into itself any second and emerge translucent white. This dragonfly clutches the top edge of the roll of film, hanging perpendicular to its sides. I move over to look closely, wobbling as I near it. It flies away and seems to vanish.

I think of the dragonfly as I leave, carrying the rolls of film. I can even imagine it clinging to my dark hair, its excreta sticking to my scalp.

Darkness. People like barriers cross in front of me, surrounding me with stale sweat. Men call from restaurants, wanting me to eat their steak and their *moussaka*, drink their *retsina* rather than across the street, somewhere else. I search for the photo developers that the hotel recommended. Darkness makes the men like shadows bending over each other in the restaurants and bars. The street carries the stench of meat freshly thrown from the market. I hand in the rolls of films. An hour. It is important to see her face again.

“The Plaka,” Jude had said, “— shopping. Andy, please stay here, as I won’t be long. I want to get you something and you only get in the way.”

A good excuse, it seems now. I loved the Plaka when we went yesterday; it made me dream of becoming a gnarled backgammon player hunched over in the gutter drinking espresso, watching the ephemeral world pass by, not caring about my street busking and earning a living. I can’t imagine where she is.

We had walked down to Hephaestus’s temple as the skeletal cats exited for the night, and bought a bright blue shawl from one of the shops opposite. I said it was the color of her eyes; she’d laughed and said she hadn’t realized I was such an old romantic. My eyes never leave her; maybe she’s taken herself from me deliberately as a lesson, to experience freedom.

I stand in a square listening to music coming from upstairs. A light breeze comes up from the coast. Shadows of people reach around corners. People come out of a downstairs door. At first I think the girl with her arm round the chap is Jude, but of course she isn’t. The girl wears

the face of someone about to make love: intense, earnest and unreal, her mouth open slightly and turned down, her eyes screwed up and nostrils flared. The man moves her away quickly.

We started our travels in Athens 14 days ago, flying in on a delayed bumpy night-flight, and were herded through darkened and hot streets while sensible people lay sleeping. In the coach, Jude slept, while I looked out the window at every sight as we left the Piraeus, almost afraid to miss anything. I wanted to be able to discover what was hidden behind every orange shutter, every untidy barricade of trash cans, every car parked precariously at weird angles on corners. Under the pearly streetlights Athens late night heat rose to greet the sky, making the roads look like dustbowls, dry, hazy, faded as if stunned by the sun, slightly pallid. Washed, weather-worn like an old hat. A thin dog, in the uncanny and unreal light, crossed on his way home. Jude, asleep, puckered her lips as she shivered in dreams.

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Jude in the hotel shower, water streaming down, her back turned, her body dipping forwards, my arms around her; her slightly startled face; Jude in the boat round Nafplio, hands deep in the blue water, her face glowing, her up-turned nose burnt a vibrant red, the intense sky, the spooky cries of cormorants.

These are what I think about now walking these streets without her. I party with a newfound Greek friend in the street as a party floats down from the flat above, bringing with it noise, smoke and laughter. Someone is sick in a gutter near a trash pile. Well-dressed evening restaurant-goers pass disdainfully as I lift a Heineken to my mouth and feel immediately nauseated as it courses down my throat. Everyone laughs hysterically as only people who don't know each other well can, talking in a variety of languages about football, British girls and the tightness of jeans, while heat gathers in the street, gathers around our feet, and rises insidiously to scratch at our eyeballs. A voice from the right says hello and a man passes me a joint. He has a face like a pixie, tiny and bright. English. More people enter the square, rush up the stairs of a nearby house after knocking twice. The party swells the flat. People are leaning out of the building, hanging over the window frames, pushing at the brick as if to take just one more person. Monotonous music pulsates along the pathways in my head, insinuating into my flesh like

images of Jude. Deep thump of electronic drums, too perfect to be acceptable. I hate sounding so old.

Her image washes like thick liquid over my eyes, into my sockets and down the slopes of my cheeks, moving, changing, reshaping, saturating me. I open my eyes for a second and look up at the balcony of partygoers — a face staring at me, eyes like blue ice floes, whites shocking, hair blonde and dazed. If I blinked long enough could Jude reform before me, slide from the images over my eyes and stand in front of me?

Once she told me when she was making love that she felt she was like a butterfly flying above her head, that coming had been a transcendent experience and she had felt above and beyond herself. But this wasn't with me.

It was just two days ago that she had told me about Richard and his disappearance; her words coming soft and slow in a honeyed-little — girl voice as we lay in the hotel bed having just made love. Just the day before we had re-entered Athens after circumnavigating Greece: Mycenae, Toulon, Corinth Canal, lunch dabbling our toes in the Aegean at a restaurant before the ferry for Patras, thunderstorms over Olympia, wandering the ruins under the clear light of a warm day, Delphi at night under red clouds, eating sticky *koulouria* in the town square and listening to dogs trot home howling. Heat from the window, a slight breeze, covers off, our minds open and our bodies vulnerable; her words crept inside me like shame. I filled up gradually like a balloon with her words.

She said that he had made her feel like this a few times, though what different thing he did that no one else had she didn't know, but it had made her unable to forget him. She said it was like a fluke, this feeling, an accident of nature. He wasn't any better in bed than anyone else. In every partner after him she had waited for that feeling to happen again, to arise out of herself, free, hovering, imagining herself with wings, soft and gentle like a butterfly, gently teasing the air with her flapping, rising with dust through the air, carrying herself on motes of light, before tumbling back to flesh, smiling.

Richard had then vanished some months after they had broken up. As Jude spoke, languidly, carefully, her arm reached back along the top of her head as if smoothing something down, as if she had rehearsed this many times in her head. He'd done this exact trip with his girlfriend of the time and at some point along the journey by coach around Greece had disappeared — Jude was never told exactly where. She said she

tried to imagine his shape vanishing as he ran the track at Delphi, or a pillar at Hera's Temple at Olympia opening him up and swallowing him. Or maybe just the streets of Athens took him. She stood up at that point and walked naked to the window. Sweat trickled down her back. I sniffed the space she had left impregnated with her sweat and shape in the hollow of the bed. He could be out there, she said, hidden in the smog and the heat and the shadows rising from the hills. She worried about him. He'd been gone a year. The whole time we had been together. Then she smiled and I lurched inward, suddenly tasting bile. The taste of fear, the smell of loneliness; the immensity of space around me. I had never felt it before.

Suddenly my small Greek friend, Ed, walks away, "Where you going?" I shout, bile once more filling my throat. I've grown used to his face. He makes a motion with his right hand to indicate going for a piss. I smile and relax, covering the bile with fresh Red Bull from a new can. He returns from the darkened alley behind the square with a girl, whom he is glad to see, even though she doesn't stop talking in Greek. He looks at me and shrugs his shoulders.

"Andy, you come with Gina and me," he says, "A group of us are heading to Cape Sounion on the coast. Someone is performing. Much fun. Everyone in Athens will be there." He races away back to the alley and I hear a car. People scream and move rapidly out of the way as a car lurches into the square with my Greek friend behind the wheel. An American Cadillac convertible. He grins at my surprised face. "You like?"

"It's yours?"

"Of course, Andy. Get in, Gina."

"Everyone will be in their best cars tonight circling the city! Get in. Tonight we celebrate... Gina, what is it we celebrate?" Gina shrugs her shoulders. He laughs. "We celebrate! We will learn what soon enough! Who knows where we'll end?" They wait while I collect my photos and then we are gone.

AT MYCENAE, WHERE THE WIND left scratch marks on our faces, Jude slipped away on one of the many pathways. I found her in Agamemnon's tomb way down the hill. She said she liked being alone in such a place, where somehow you felt overawed – by the tomb, by the height of the hill where Mycenae lay, tucked into the mountainside like a child lying with its mother, and remnants of the civilization, like leftover food from a party. The colors of the day

were beige and gray. Beige the ground, beige the weeds cut and torn by the wind, darker beige the earth and gray the sky, littered with black clouds. She said it made her want to cry, to see it like this, so raw, exposed.

Tourists walked, heads bowed into the wind while buzzards screeched above. It wasn't like Delphi where the sky had been the lightest blue and Jude said she felt light like chiffon. Here I bent into the wind and looked for her, past the stones, up top, then back and down to the beehive of the Tomb where I found her leaning against a wall looking upwards, arms crossed and one foot treading firmly on the other, enraptured. While I was taking a picture of her, I could hear the room echoing and someone bumped into me, knocking my arms. That jolted

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shot will be in those rolls of film just like every other shot I took of her. It was a strange place, the Tomb; it made me think that we were all sharing this but what was it? I looked at these people in their shorts, white blouses and wondered if I'd ever bump into them in the world ever again. We sang like drinking pals on the coach.

I try to open the photos but Gina stops me, grabbing them. Jude's absence makes me think I invented her.

I feel the breeze immediately and a lightness. The roads are full of teenagers and twenty-somethings leaning out of Beetles, Golfs and Renaults. We are the only ones in a Cadillac, Gina in the front seat drinking from a can. We pass the police sitting on the edge of the road but

no one stops us. The cars circle like Indians following a trail of wagons. We circle two or three times, stopping sometimes to sing under trees or to talk. Everyone is smiling, shouting like it's a rodeo. It's bizarre. I loll in the back of the Cadillac, unbuckled, unbelted, without gravity, without a trajectory. A breeze could throw me, or a dragonfly could catapult me skywards; I feel useless. At home I would try to entertain these people. I miss not being able to. Jude says I am alive when I am on show, when I entertain the crowds with my stilt-walking and fire-eating. I watch her watching me and watching the crowd. She says me swallowing fire is a turn-on for her. I come home and she makes me lick her with my kerosene mouth, before letting me make love to her. I

wish I were on my stilts, fire-eating for these people. On my stilts I am powerful.

As we circle like performers round the roads of Athens, I try not to think of Jude and empty hotel beds and a woman who was barely there, who preferred chasing vanishing boyfriends to me. I like to drink. The Athens air is grimy. It tenses me. I twist the can of Red Bull round in my hand like I am strangling a chicken.

Fireworks and crackers shoot into the sky as we leave, and in the distance begins the slow build-up whine of police sirens, then Gina shouting. For ages we ride round and round. At one point we nearly run over a cat, which makes Ed laugh crazily.

“Just relax,” says Ed. “It will be a great party. Big party. Have a drink or sleep.” We went to Sounion, Jude and I, along with the rest of our reddening compatriots on the coach tour. Cape Sounion is less than an hour’s drive from Athens, they said. A temple to Poseidon on a promontory. One more step and you’d be in the sea, wading with islands. It is quite wonderful.

Gina says we will be there for dawn and this excites me. I saw it at dusk with Jude, boats on the lilac horizon, little dotted islands. Jude had stood at the edge, looking over the Aegean, and felt, so she said, like Penelope waiting for Odysseus. The Greeks have always stood watch over the sea; watched its changing colors. We looked for Byron’s signature and there it was. Hundreds of people look for it daily. Aren’t we tourists like parasites, following each other round the sites like stitches in a hem? But these things have to be seen. How else can you see them but as a tourist? You cannot live in every place you visit.

I try to sleep. They play music while the breeze increases as darkness is penetrated, bringing with it vibrant smells of oranges, fresh leaves, sea-brine. We leave Athens noisily. I don’t sleep much, for I am busy remembering Jude and how we ate squid at a wayside restaurant before climbing the ferry to the Peloponnese, dabbling our toes in the clear water and thinking the Aegean was a dream. An unreal sky overhead. We inhabit the space of a picture inside the head of a dreamer. The space expands as we move about inside it—as the skin of our toes, fingers—reacts to the coldness—clambering over it like mad children. Cold washed over us and the picture now grows and swells and it looks more unreal looking back on it than it did at the time; that we were truly there, that these things happened. I will look back on this car ride into an empty Greek countryside and it will feel more exciting as a memory than it does now, as I sit here smelling of smoke and alcohol. Gina snores.

“Nearly there!” says Ed turning round, making the car swerve. The hills fade and the distance glows, the hills wear a halo. The sea appears again. We are at Sounion. Gina wakes.

I walk about the empty site; I could never believe it could be like this. No tourists, no coaches pumping out diesel. No girlish Jude laughing, racing up to the stone pillars, her skirt tucked into her knickers, shouting out information about the temple – the mention of it in Homer, me following, relishing the glimpses of her bare flesh. Sometimes you have the taste of someone in your mouth and I can taste her now. I can feel the crevices of her body, taste the sweatiness between her legs, on my tongue when she lets me get truly intimate with her body. I miss her touch on my skin, her presence like a touch on my eyes. I can see her but I ache for something more substantiative than my memory. Flesh is better than a memory, even though the memories have the power. I taste fear again. Fear of never seeing her. Suddenly my body is drained of drunkenness and I wonder what I am doing here and what I should do about Jude.

THE TEMPLE IS COVERED IN BLUE LIGHT glowing in places like a radioactive star. The day is beginning. Gina and Ed are laughing. “See! Everyone but everyone is here!” I reach back to the car and grab my photos. Gina looks at me as if I shouldn’t concern myself with them now. I take a quick look and see the theater at Epidaurus, but no image of Jude, before Gina takes my arm and pulls me towards the Temple.

Far below the temple, in the water people are swimming. It’s a long walk down to them. Almost the same set of people who circled Athens are here in small groups, running over the rocks, the same laughter, the same inane drunken conversations. I wander through, listening to snippets of Greek, English and French. The people are young, though there’s a gray-haired chap standing on a rock high over everyone else. People are running over to the nearby Athena’s temple, bottles roll to the floor, lighted cigarettes wave in a dance-like procession, like a procession of lighted saints in a Spanish town.

Gina hands me another drink. Drunkenness washes through my body once more. She’s small and cheeky, with cow’s eyes. Ed watches. I would have preferred to stay back in Athens wandering the Plaka, like those stringy cats; waiting for the sun to rise, to drink espresso in the gutter like an old man. Our flight is tomorrow. I should get back, to wait by the phone in case Jude rings. What if she returns to the hotel room to find I’m gone? I can’t bear this not knowing. Her absence is like a slap in my face. Our flat without her is unimaginable.

I wander down, carefully, steadily, following Ed. Down by the rocks a couple are kissing. The girl is nearly falling into the water. I imagine her naked, leg stretched out, his hands reaching for her wet crotch. But she's not. I am trapped in this freedom that Jude's absence and night have given me. It is just like a rope around my body, binding me more closely than bars; it is almost as if the sky is my enclosure.

IN THIS HALF-LIGHT many shapes remind me of Jude. Everyone looks like Jude. She is here in millions, like shattered pieces of glass. My eyes are disfigured by freedom; all I see is her face — the scar on her eyebrows, her rich skin radiating warmth. I want to throw stones at these false idols.

Water on my shoes. I look up and there is Jude, smiling wryly. How can that be? Everyone will be here — Ed had said. Light creeps through the fissures in the sky as she moves towards me, wearing a yellow t-shirt with a fat strawberry printed upon it I have never seen before, and her hair is tied up unusually in a ponytail. She is shattered glass made whole. My hungry eyes feast upon her. She is real. I didn't make her up. The night retreats quickly.

She touches my arm, says "How did you find me here? I should've guessed I could never escape you."

"I didn't know you wanted to."

She smiles. "It was an accident. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

"Where you been?"

"Looking. Out. I needed a break."

"I've been going crazy."

"I know. Sorry." She takes my hand. We walk. "I found him."

"Who?"

"Richard."

"I don't believe it! That's impossible."

When she moves her arm from mine, looks back, and smiles at a distant part of the darkness, something moves out in the sea; a light faintly glowing. Waves licking rocks like tongues on lollipops. My throat con-

stricts. Fear again. Perfection is impossible. We all compromise. I bend like potter's clay for her. She molds me with her very breath. She touches me and I shape into elasticity. Nothing is ever how you want it. No one is ever how you want them. I wanted Jude without ghosts but they are with her in her every footprint. She has been following Richard but really he has inhabited her pores like bacteria.

"I saw him today in a shop."

"In Athens?"

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"He was working there. Just working. Nothing had happened to him. He'd just decided to stay, to be here and not somewhere else."

She smiles a smile of sexual intensity; so incongruous, so intense, so content. I remember the pale dragonfly. The butterfly of her imagination. They could be hovering round her now like she was a Chinese lantern. On her outstretched fingers pale delicate blue wings flap in the night breeze, glowing against her fingers.

"You slept with him?"

She says nothing, turns to walk away from me, into the growing light. I trip over stones as I look up, walking towards her but she has gone. Gina and Ed are laughing. Above, cars pull up, motorcycles and mopeds. An army of partygoers emerge. A boat starts quickly to the side of me, a guttural heaving; everyone runs down the hill, racing, jumping over rocks and swinging round dying olive trees. All around are people shouting.

Dawn, like a precocious, spoiled child, is growing sharp and fat. Light settles on the hills, on the trees, on the land like a vibrant effervescent covering of dust, picking out contours and undulations. The sky changes from glowing blue to translucent pink yellow gray sliced through with shades of blue. Everything looks still. The sky lightens in seconds; the land lightens. My eyes squint, yet the sun isn't in view. Light illuminates my arms, and I feel as if I were in a disco picked out by radiant light. There is Jude, smiling still. I race after her. I touch her. She is with a man. I recognize him. He's well-dressed, light beard on his chin, hair

scorched by the sun. She whispers in his ear and he turns to me. I feel still caught in the spotlight, jagged, frozen and moving statically like a shadow puppet. Her flesh in my hand. I touch my mouth with her sweat, and lick my palm. Her eyes crinkle like she's eaten something nasty.

She says, "Go home." Gina reaches me. We are all slow motion. I feel like screaming. Gina smiles to Jude. They say they are heading out to the islands.

"But you can't go," says Jude, "You've a flight in..." she looks at her watch, "three hours. Poor babe." She laughs and walks slowly away looking back over her shoulder as she descends to the boat.

I follow her. I have to follow her—I cannot be alone. It frightens me more than I ever believed possible. I trip on the rocks. My feet stand in water. The light returns to normal as she and the boat head out into the rising sun. She leans on Richard. She has gone. A dot in the distance, as small as a dragonfly.

The light is ordinary now, boring even. New-born daylight steals my strength. I should hitch a lift on a returning moped to Athens, to the hotel room, to the airport, to England. But instead my knees loosen; I flop into the water as if boneless, dropping photos like confetti from my pockets. I lie here face down in the water, tasting salt in my throat. Photos—a Grecian sky; of a sweet face among many less appealing; of the view of the harbor from our window at Nafplio; of a sideways-posing body in a hazy focus—arc away from me, drifting with the current, while water pushes over my legs, my arms, my back; as the sun rises blazing, scorching, making the sky as white as the sclera of an eye, blocking out the lightest blue.