

It's a climb from the port and I take the steps of Donkey Shit Lane at a steady pace, a heart-shaped stone in my pocket. I walk alone and, though there's no one to witness, I resist the urge to stop and rest at the standing posts after the steepest part. I watch my step, a stumble can so easily become a fall, a thought that disgusts the gazelle still living within my stiffening body.

The marble slabs shine from centuries of use; the light is pure. Even on a morning gloomy as this, with the sky low enough to blot out the mainland and clouds crowding in on the harbour, these whitewashed streets dazzle.

Two young lads skip, arm in arm, down the steps towards me. I'm as anonymous as a shepherd or a muleteer in Dinos's ancient tweed jacket, my hands bulging its pockets, my boots comfortably laced. The lines on my face have been deepened by these years in the sun and my hair hasn't seen dye, or even the hairdresser's scissors, for who-knows-how-long, but so what? It's off my face, in a loose tail, the way I've always done it. I'm still here, a little bruised, a little dented, but remarkably the girl who first set foot on this island almost sixty years ago remains. I suspect only those who knew me then can see through the thickening patina

and it breaks my heart how rapidly the crowd of seers is diminishing.

The call about Leonard came last night. I sat quietly for a while, listened to the owls. I took out my old notebooks, the threepenny jotters that came with me to the island in 1960, found him in my hopeful, curly scrawls. My neck got cricked. The cocks crowed all through the night. I slept badly and woke to a morning crowded by dreams.

The summer visitors are long gone; there's unrest in Athens as austerity bites, refugees, lost children, fires in the streets. Boats are going out, pulling people from the water. There's plenty for us to chew over so you might think we'd let the American election slide by. But at the port this morning, as I idled with my one good bitter espresso of the day, watching the mules being led away from the boats with their cargoes, the news of the new President found me. It slithered from the water with the morning pages and spread rapidly like a stench along the agora. There were horrified groans, even from the donkeys, disbelieving splutters from every table, passer-by and boat. For a moment it was a comfort to think that at least Leonard has been spared this.

I stop outside Maria's shop at Four Corners and listen for voices. I would feel a fool if anyone saw me approaching his front door with my heart-shaped stone and I prepare to walk straight past as I turn the corner from Crazy Street. The street isn't actually named Crazy but something that sounds similar and that's what we heard when Leonard came fresh from the notary, pulled off his sixpenny cap and landed the deeds to his house beside it on the table, his grin a little bashful at first, self-conscious, like we might all think he was showing off.

Later that day we came armed with borrowed pails and long-handled brushes for whitewash and Leonard had new batteries for the gramophone that he'd placed in the centre of the stone floor. Some of his records had warped like Dali's clocks and become unplayable but there was Ray Charles and Muddy Waters and a woman singer I liked but whose name I don't remember. Later still, a fire of lumber among the lemon trees on the terrace, jugs of retsina, a little hashish, dancing. Paint-spattered shorts, brown limbs, bare feet. War babies, most of us even younger than him and him just a cub, really. We lapped up the freedom our elders had fought for and our appetites reached well beyond their narrow, war-shattered shadows.

Was it drugs and contraception that made change seem possible? Was it a conscious revolution? Or were we simply children who craved languor and sex and mind alteration to ease the anxiety that was etched into our DNA, detonating in each of our young brains its own private Hiroshima?

Ha! To my dad I was a bloody beatnik.

We asked little of this island except days sunny and long enough to keep the Cold War from biting, a *galloni* of wine for six drachmas, and a solid white house for two pounds and ten shillings a month. We paid only lip service to its name: Hydra. A name that means 'water' though an ancient earthquake buried its springs and turned it dry but for a few sweet wells.

In Greek myth, the monstrous Hydra is doorman to the Underworld.

'A many-headed serpent with halitosis so bad it kills with one breath,' I say when it's my turn to set a riddle.

Leonard laughs. Someone has a bouzouki, someone else a guitar. There's ouzo, stars, a slice of moon as thin as the edge of a spoon. Some old brushwood burns with a resinous crackle; our eyes brighten in an explosion of sparks. We grow wilder, smash our glasses to the wall of Leonard's new house. For luck!

But Marianne, fetching a broom, asks: 'What is this crazy custom?' And not one of us – not American or Canadian, not Greek, English, French, Swedish or Czech, not even the Australian brain on stilts that is George Johnston – can come up with an excuse for this rain of broken glass, except that Marianne threw hers first.

I give the stone heart in my pocket a squeeze. I'm trying to remember why they left so soon after he bought his house. Little more than a month, and Marianne's skipping through my memory and slipping the stone from her hand to mine. I'm guessing November.

A Russian wind with icy breath, waves scattering across the stones of the port, octopus strung like old tights along a boat rope at the jetty. Leonard in his raincoat (yes – blue, though not remotely famous yet), passing his leather case to the boatman, and here comes Marianne, in rain-splotched and rumpled shirt and sailor pants, hefting several large bundles, lithe and quick as a boy. She turns and calls my name; the wind streaks hair across her face.

It's the first time she's even looked at me for weeks. 'No, no. I can't bear it if you cry.' She dumps the luggage, comes running back, the rain pretty on her skin. I can't stop hugging her, I'm so relieved that she doesn't want to leave on bad terms.

‘Please don’t look so lonely,’ she says, pulling away and closing my fingers around the stone. She tells me it was the first thing Leonard ever gave her. The stone fits in my palm, meat-coloured and marbled with white and mauve. It truly is a heart, and by the way she’s looking at me I know that now she and Leonard are leaving together, I have been forgiven.

Her smile is so sweet, so full of hope. ‘Just when the one in my chest had been pounded to pieces by Axel. He said I could probably use a replacement.’

Marianne’s eyes are blue as summer skies; her hair is the startling sort of blonde. It’s hard to believe she’d ever think of me as a rival.

‘So much has changed, be happy for me, please. My baby boy waits in Oslo but my heart stays here on the island with you until our return ... Oh, sweet Erica, you mustn’t cry.’

Leonard offers me his handkerchief and directs my gaze from the wet port and up to the streaming grey and purple mountains. This place has been kind to him. This island. This woman. He’s pointing back the way they came. ‘There is my beautiful house, and sun to tan my maggot-coloured mind ...’ He ruffles my hair like you might a little girl’s and tells me he isn’t planning on staying away long.

Leonard doesn’t look back, not even once, but Marianne’s waving and waving until the boat is lost in churning foam. It’s simultaneously yesterday and ancient history, thinking about this. I’m swept by a surge of loneliness. Too many goodbyes.

A lemon tree grown taller than the wall is hung with strips of insecticide. I pretend to myself that she’s still

here, just the other side, picking tomatoes on the terrace. Leonard and that tragic boy of hers too. Marianne was happiest making a home, bringing flowers to his table and calm to his storm, sewing curtains, pouring wine, baby Axel lulled to sleep by the strings of his guitar ... I think of Axel Joachim, or Barnet as Leonard took to calling him, sleepily sucking his thumb, his sun-bleached hair as white as his pillow.

Leonard brings his guitar out to the terrace, watches us dancing. The embers glow beneath the lemon trees, just the other side of this wall, but the bellowing of a workman snaps me back to earth and it might as well be Mars. We were heady with ideals, drunk with hopes of our languorous lope into a future that had learnt from its past. I reach the door of Leonard's house feeling quite giddy and a groan escapes me at the thought of that man in the White House, of a world turning backwards.

The nightmares will always find you even if you do live on a rock.

There's nobody about to hear my muttering, though flowers have already been left on the step. The white walls of Leonard's house rise blankly, grey shutters shut. By the look of it, Fatima's brass hand has recently been polished. I hope someone has been in to cover the mirrors. I bend to the step and place the stone among other offerings: drying carnations, teabags, oranges, a single gypsy rose. I think about snatching it back but it was his and Marianne's, and not mine at all.

'A talisman,' Marianne said, and added with a giggle, 'maybe it's the petrified heart of Orpheus.'

I kneel at the step. The other side of this door, in the hall, the mirror keeps its secrets above a polished table with a lace cloth where they laid out their treasures.

Marianne and Leonard made up stories; along with Orpheus's heart, they had a fossilised goat's horn Dionysus had drunk from, gold and blue fragments from Epidaurus, an iron monastery bell that Marianne once found buried in a pine forest in Santorini, a large rusting tin box with a relief of a blindfolded woman playing a harp without strings. The carved mirror was their oracle. Leonard painted in gold ink: *I change. I am the same. I change. I am the same. I change. I am the same.* He once made me stop and look into it. He lit candles and said some sort of prayer, bid me to keep looking until I knew who I was.

I change. I am the same. I guess he meant well even though he got carried away and Marianne hated me for a while. Ah well, that's how it was in those days.

That was the last year without electricity up here. Sometimes it seems a shame. An hour or two after sundown the town generators fell silent and we were lit only by moon and flame. Lanterns, charcoal braziers, icons flickering above bowls of oil with little flames floating on corks. Everyone is beautiful by candlelight. I take my cooker and fridge for granted these days but my memories are golden. I change. I am the same.

I was here one Shabbat. The lighting of the candles, the little dishes of salt and oil, olives, fresh anchovies. Marianne had somehow managed a challah loaf from his temperamental oven. Leonard's benedictions were not misplaced. The hand-embroidered tablecloth, sweet water from the wells, the glass of the kerosene lamps sparkling, white

anemones gracefully dipping their heads from an earthenware jug; even the air around her was luminous.

I think of those nights lit by lamps, music and dancing, of Magda's mournful Russian songs, shadows leaping on the walls, of guitars and bouzouki and accordion, Mikhailis with his fiddle, Jewish songs known to both Magda and Leonard, and sometimes, strumming his guitar, a few hesitant lines or verses of his own that seemed to stalk him like cats to the creamery.

I don't think he's been here for almost twenty years so I'm surprised to find myself weeping like this. I haven't even brought a tissue. But then, unlike Leonard, who leapt right in with this house and another man's wife and child, I didn't expect this place to become home.

One

Many dine out on well-worn yarns of backpacking along the winding dusty roads east that became known as the hippy trail. The man across the table will tell you of his summer of love almost before you've caught his name, and as he pours the wine your mind replaces that grey suit with patched shorts and tanned shoeless feet, a guitar on a knotted string. But we didn't hitch-hike to Greece and hadn't thought of India, or even Istanbul or Beirut. And we weren't hippies, at least not when we set off. I'm not sure that hippies had even been invented as early as 1960.

My journey that Easter was mapped by a mind that dreamt only of a boy. Specifically, Jimmy Jones, who combined a face for poetry with a naturally graceful and muscular body that leapt and ran and balanced and twirled and invariably triumphed in press-up contests with my brother. First love arrived in a flare of flaming lust, a genie sprung from a grubby lamp that brightened my life and opened the world.

Jimmy Jones was twenty-one, four years older than me, and his wishes extended beyond simply granting mine. He had plans to travel that summer and his backpack shook with impatience at the foot of his rickety bed. I was

needy and adrift since caring for my dying mother had so abruptly reached its conclusion and wanted nothing but Jimmy Jones's warm skin and soft kisses and a backpack of my own.

Mum left me the means to escape by way of an enigma. There wasn't much to go on, just the surprise of one thousand unexplained pounds in a Post Office Savings Account and, in its wake, the serendipitous arrival of a book. The author of the book was Charmian Clift, an Australian writer who lived here on Hydra and who, for several years in London, had been my mother's closest friend. I was looking for any sort of road and thought Charmian might shed some light on the secrets my mother had taken to her grave.

The typing pool where I worked was a torture chamber in triplicate of clattering keys, pinging bells and bottom-pinchers. The most exciting thing to happen was a cream cake on a birthday. This was not the stuff of dreams that my dying mother had wished for me. I dreamt of the sun and a glittering sea, of a beautiful man-boy diving from high rocks, surfacing, surviving. I dreamt of light through shutters falling across a bed, though I'm sure I had plenty to say at the time about freedom and escaping the rat race. Mainly I dreamt of dreaming.

My education petered out when my mother became ill and my future remained an unimagined thing. There was little to tie me to London. My father, had this been the Middle Ages, would most certainly have had me fitted with a cast-iron chastity belt. During the dreary London winter that trailed my mother's death he knew that something was making me cheerful and decided that that something had

to be stopped. That boy – that dropout – was not allowed over the threshold.

The days stretched into weeks of half-hatched plans to run away. It was unrelentingly cold and rainy; al fresco activities in the secret dips and wooded corners of London's royal parks became soggy affairs. Most days, since my father rarely allowed me out, Jimmy waited in the greasy spoon across from my office to walk me back to Bayswater through the dripping trees and sodden grass. We snatched moments in the pavilion of the Italian Gardens, or in the shamefully familiar hollows in certain trees of St James's. I'm amazed we were never arrested! I clung to him while we plotted our escape with his raincoat a canopy above our heads.

Mum's death had been as ordered as her life. She left no loose ends for us to tie. At home we were suffering strange and constant tensions, a sort of thrumming at barely audible frequencies, just beneath those of grief. It was as well that Bobby had moved out.

Mum's was a life scented by the fresh, good smells of hot ironing and baking cakes, a dab of Ma Griffe when Father got home, though sometimes there was also a breath of sherry and tears. Generally, the shedding of tears was forbidden by our father. When she lay dying, Bobby only cried in the chair beside her bed when he wasn't home.

In the final stages of her illness, I stayed by her side. A teacher came down on the train from Ascot to talk to me but left without my promise to return. Mum's nurses counselled me too, said I'd get stuck if I didn't go back to school and sit my O levels. Everyone assumed that I was

scared she'd die if I left the room but I was more terrified of leaving her weakened and alone at the mercy of my father than of her dying.

Bed linen, nighties, clean, freshly ironed. Reading and snoozing and later doing all the community nurse's jobs too. Mum slept more and more as the months drifted by, smiled to find me when she woke. I sat writing stories in her threepenny jotters, savage tales of girls and wolves and houses with hidden rooms. When she was bright we made lists in the jotters and she instructed me in keeping the home the way Father liked it. Home was two floors of Palace Court, eight tall rooms to keep army-shape and spotlessly clean. His castle, her prison. It was unbearable really, what she put into a life that wouldn't contain her.

Soon no one seemed to care that I was no longer going to school, least of all me. My brother was at Hornsey Art School and worried about missing classes while gnawing at his fingers in the chair beside her bed.

'I don't mind if you draw me while I die,' she told him when she was still strong enough to comfort us like babies while we bawled.

Her last day flickers behind my eyelids like something on cine. The tints are off, light flares, the frames jump and stall. She woke as Bobby came into the room. He hadn't made it for ages and sailed in on a sea of excuses. I buttoned my lip, plumped and rearranged pillows, helped her to a more upright position, tidied what remained of her hair. Her voice was effortful because of the medication and her arm tremored as she pointed to her rolltop desk: 'Today I need you two to help me straighten out my things.'

In a locked drawer were two small rectangular packages, addressed one to me and one to my brother.

‘They’re for later. Please don’t look now,’ she said. She pressed my package into my hands. ‘Have some adventures,’ she said. ‘Dare to dream.’

It happened that night. A sleeping angel, her hands crossed at her chest. Somehow an inquest was avoided though I’ll never not suspect that she and her good doctor hastened the end.

In Bobby’s package were the keys to a car, porcelain green, a convertible, parked in the square behind Palace Court. And here’s the thing: no one had known she owned a car until she died, though we knew she could drive because Father would occasionally allow her to take control of his Austin while he sat in the passenger seat not once allowing her to decide for herself when to change gear or indicate.

It was always better if Father wasn’t reminded of the car. Bobby was careful never to enter the flat jangling his keys or mentioning the price of petrol.

There was a biblical downpour the day that Charmian Clift’s book arrived – as I’ve said, it was always raining in the London I remember from that time. Bobby came in shaking water from his hair. He looked almost indecently healthy, more front of scrum than starving artist, his cheeks reddened from running through the rain and his hair a wet haystack. He started sorting through the post on the hall table, pocketing a letter that had come for him and leaving to one side a package addressed to Mum.

‘We should’ve sent out something to let people know ...’ He tailed off with a heavy sigh. ‘Oh, well.’

Since my dad couldn't cope with even the mention of her name, Mum's post stayed in the hall until I took it away and wrote the sad tidings again and again.

'You know he never deals with any of it,' I said and Bobby shot me a look to be quiet because at that moment Father emerged from the bathroom, drying his hands and handing me the towel, as he might to a cloakroom attendant. 'This hasn't been changed in weeks,' he said and shooed us. 'What are you two up to loitering by the front door anyway?'

He made a grab for Bobby's chin and forcibly turned his face to the light.

'For pity's sake, Robert. Did I not teach you to shave properly? What's this with the bum-fluff? Are they supposed to be sideburns?'

'Leave off,' Bobby said, but Father only tightened his grip.

'I hope young Robert is not thinking of becoming a Teddy boy next,' he said while half-slapping, half-patting Bobby's cheek.

Please, please, not a row. I put my hands to my ears. Father might make me stay home on a whim. Jimmy Jones, who I knew to be waiting back at Bobby's digs, was very much on my mind. My new primrose-yellow jumper had a zip.

At last he let us be and it always felt like we were escaping even if it was only to go to the pub. Sprinting through the mizzle, we couldn't help but hold hands, and whoop as we reached Mum's little green car.

'Has it been bad all week?' Bobby asked as we settled into our seats and, not waiting for my answer, 'We'll get away soon, doll, I promise.' The doggy smell of his wet

reefer jacket filled the car. It no longer smelt of Mum's perfume. Still, I liked that he called me 'doll'.

I came tiptoeing back at dawn, sneaky as a cat. I was what my father, had he ever caught me, would've referred to as a 'dirty stopout', 'a trollop'. Mum's brown-paper parcel still waited in the hall. It was tied with tarry string and the stamps were beautiful: a large olive tree, an owl, a primitive saint. I wondered who was writing to her from Greece, and snuck to my room taking it with me. It was a risky routine, this five a.m. return, with a father like mine. My heart was pumping as I sponged myself down at the basin. Still damp, I sat at my dressing table and cut the string of the parcel that had been addressed in firmly inked capitals to Constance Hart, and not, as would have been correct in those patrician days, to Mrs Ronald Hart.

A book with a scene of white houses around a little harbour on the cover, *Peel Me a Lotus* its title and its author Charmian Clift. I looked at her picture and saw nothing of the chic upstairs neighbour I'd once known to be my mother's friend. I summoned her up, this other Charmian Clift: elegant, tall in a tightly belted camel coat, crocodile handbag hanging from the crook of her arm, bright lipstick, an enormous smile. I'd encountered her only occasionally, and years ago, though I often thought about the first time we met, wondering what it was that had made her cry. She'd come across me outside in the entrance hall, where Mum had put me for safety while our father gave Bobby a hiding. I was cowering, tears and snot streaming, when I heard the rattle of the street door, felt a gust of air. I shrank into the shadows, ashamed at the sounds that were coming from inside our flat. Charmian led me upstairs by the hand,

asking my name and what school I went to, what books I liked to read. We ended up sitting together on the top step. Her arms were around me, and though I was usually cautious of strangers, with Charmian it felt perfectly natural. She asked me my age: eight, I said and was surprised by her sudden silence and a tear that slid down her cheek. She got my name wrong after that, called me Jennifer, but I didn't mind because I thought it prettier than my own.

The picture on the book showed her beauty grown wilder, almost in disarray. Between jutting cheekbone and brow, her eyes deep and soulful, bruised almost.

The blurb spoke of an island in Greece, the expatriate life, but now here was my father throwing his shadow across any possibility of sunshine. He was thumbing his braces and, since I was in my dressing gown, completely incapable of looking at me.

'You're up early,' he said, as he stretched his braces back and forth. 'I thought I'd better check as I didn't hear you come in last night.'

'I'll have your shirt ironed in a jiff. That's why I set the alarm,' I lied, yawning and indicating my artfully rumpled bed. He cleared his throat but I got in first. 'Oh, by the way, I opened this. It came for Mum. It's from Greece. Do you remember Charmian Cliff with the two little children from upstairs? She sent it. It's her book ...' I prattled on, successfully changing the subject. As devious, it would appear, as my mother.

He gave a sour sniff. 'Oh, she's written another book, has she, Lady Airs and Graces, *and oh, do have another cocktail*. They were Australian, you know, the pair of them ...' The word 'Australian' might have been gristle the way he spat

it out, and with a final snap of his braces he stalked from my room so that I might finish getting myself ‘decent for work’.

I read Charmian’s book on the bus. I read it in my booth while the yards of punched tapes clicked and clattered through the telex machine. I read of a life of risk and adventure, of a family swimming from rocks in crystal waters, of mountain flowers, of artists admired and poseurs quietly ridiculed, of her husband George (who sounded very witty and clever though I had no memory of ever meeting him at all), of poverty and making-do and local oddballs and saints and the race to prepare a house for the birth of her third child, of an invasion of tourists and jellyfish, an earthquake, of lives spent flying close to the sun. It was little wonder I found myself still lost in its pages well beyond lunchtime and had to be ticked off by Betty, the typing-pool queen. Slipped inside the book was Charmian’s folded card, quite plain.

‘Darling Connie, I wrote this book about our family’s first year here on the island and it’s at last being published in Great Britain. Spread the word in any way you can and most importantly don’t let what I’ve written put you off coming. There’s always a warm welcome for you here from one who firmly believes you still have a chance, Charmian.’

I felt a fluttering of desire as I read her words and an intense craving for that warm welcome and a chance for myself. I couldn’t wait to press Charmian’s book on Jimmy.

Jimmy Jones had long broken his family’s bindings by dropping out of law school and emerging as something brighter and more colourful, more drawn to Jack Kerouac, Sartre and Rilke than to the laws of tort. Jimmy’s wings

carried him to a wooden studio at the bottom of Mrs Singh's garden where a few odd jobs freed him to paint and write poetry and stay in bed until lunchtime.

My thoughts of the island were too exciting for the telephone and Father's acutely tuned ear. He remained in a foul mood and came up with plenty for me to do around the flat. I wasn't even allowed to throw out a pair of socks of his where the entire heel had gone. It's one of my abiding memories of those grey months after Mum died. Being bid to sit in what had been her chair, a pretty one, button-backed and covered in pea-green velvet, her sewing box at my feet, while he sat slurping tea, slumped in his wing chair watching *Dixon of Dock Green*.

I returned to the subject of Charmian Cliff and her book. It was a Tuesday, toad-in-the-hole, his favourite. I'd made gravy and mash so there was a chance he'd be in a better mood.

I was wrong; by the look on his face you'd think something was rancid: 'Erica, do we really have to talk about your mother's friends while we're eating.'

It was hard to believe Mum's stories of Dad before the war, his handsome smile and dancing feet. His famed quick wit had taken a direct hit at Dunkirk; his get-up-and-go had departed. He used to climb mountains for fun, proposed to her up in the clouds on the peak of the Brecon Beacons. When he was stationed in Cairo he arranged for flowers to be delivered to her every week he was gone. He didn't stint on paying her dressmaker's bills, nor for her shampoos and sets. She still dressed every night for his return from the office, though I have no memory of him ever sweeping her out the door to a restaurant or the theatre. Routine was

the only thing that kept him sane: his whisky on the tray, ice and silver tongs and the folded newspaper, dinner, then his chair and television while she fluttered in and out with tea and mending.

When we were old enough to be left, she'd escape for the occasional weekend – Great-Aunt Vera's in Hampshire, Cousin Penny with 'the problem' in Wales – but not without punishment on her return. One time he threw a casserole across the kitchen floor and made us leave it until she got back two nights later. He stood over her, soundlessly watching, while she was down on her knees scrubbing the congealed mess with brush and pail. I preferred not to think of her on the floor, flinching at his feet. I decided to punish him, persevered with talking about Charmian.

'They'd had enough of the rat race. Apparently they went to a different Greek island for a year and Charmian wrote a book about that too. I wonder if Mum ever read it ...?' but now he was pulling off his napkin and scraping back his chair.

'Don't bother checking the bookcase, you won't find it here. No shame at all, these decadents, dragging their children from pillar to post, despising ordinary people, staying up drinking all night with their lah-di-dah artists and poofter friends.' He wiped his mouth savagely and threw the napkin beside his empty plate.

I went to my room and added a PS to my letter to Charmian Clift. Could she find me a house to rent? And how much would it cost?

And here, at last, is Jimmy, in a slice of light as though straight off the screen, and to my mind more handsome than any film star. He's opening the door to me with a sly grin. To this day I've never known a face so transformed by its smile. Jimmy in repose was rather haunted. But when he smiled it was like the sun coming out and, just as I'd imagined, he was reaching for the zip of my fluffy new primrose jumper.

'Will you come with me to an island in Greece?' He was behind me as I climbed the ladder to his bed and answered by sinking his teeth into my bottom.

We did the maths. By the time we joined Bobby and the others at the Gatehouse, we'd given ourselves a year. The band was winding down. I was pleased to see the old sax player was there, a lugubrious veteran in his worn mackintosh with the most soul-rending tone to his playing. Paper moon. A cardboard sea. I thought of Jimmy Jones and me on Charmian's island, of the seasons turning, extra blankets for our bed, charcoal burning in a brazier. The double bass plinked; the saxophone's song dwindled to a horizon borne on a few mournful breaths. I took a cigarette from a friend of Bobby's and perched at the edge of their table, pregnant with plans. Jimmy went to queue at the bar.

Bobby's new girl was from the art school: his usual type, lean and bird-boned, dressed like an off-duty ballet dancer in cable-knit sweater and tight black Capri pants. She was studiously monochrome, her face too small for such extravagantly black-fringed eyes, raven hair cut to a delicate nape, the neck of a swan. She sat on a stool in the middle of the group twining and untwining her long legs, saying 'cool' and 'super hep' without appearing self-conscious.

‘Edie Carson, this is my sister Erica, prisoner of Palace Court, Bayswater; Erica, this is Edie, Queen of Wood Green.’ Bobby was gesturing with a pint mug brimming with beer. It slopped on the table between Edie and me and, as we both reached to mop it, our heads met with a bump and Bobby said, ‘Glad to see you two hitting it off,’ and we both groaned.

Soon we were back to Jimmy’s studio and, though it was cold enough to see your own breath, we kept each other warm. Jimmy’s bed was on a ledge high up inside the skylight, Bobby’s a divan behind stacked easels and a curtain of purple velvet. Edie was not shy about crying out.

A few nights later Bobby told Edie Carson about our plans to travel, because as soon as Jimmy and me got serious Bobby knew he didn’t want to get left behind. Edie had plans of her own; she and her best friend Janey weren’t hanging around waiting for spring. We made a date to meet Edie and Janey at the port of Piraeus the week before Easter.